

A Midsummer Night's Dream

The play features three interlocking plots, connected by a celebration of the wedding of Duke Theseus of Athens and the Amazonian queen Hippolyta. In the opening scene, Hermia refuses to comply with her father Egeus's wish for her to marry his chosen man, Demetrius. In response, Egeus quotes before Theseus an ancient Athenian law whereby a daughter must marry the suitor chosen by her father, or else face death or lifelong chastity worshipping Diana as a nun. The word in this sense is an anachronism.

Hermia and her lover Lysander therefore decide to elope by escaping through the forest at night. Hermia informs her best friend Helena, but Helena has recently been rejected by Demetrius and decides to win back his favour by revealing the plan to him. Demetrius, followed doggedly by Helena, chases Hermia, who, in turn, chases Lysander, from whom she becomes separated.

Meanwhile, Oberon, king of the fairies, and his queen, Titania, arrive in the same forest to attend Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. Oberon and Titania are estranged because Titania refuses to give her Indian page-boy to Oberon for use as his "knight" or "henchman," since the child's mother was one of Titania's worshippers. Oberon seeks to punish Titania's disobedience and recruits the mischievous Puck (also called Hobgoblin and Robin Goodfellow) to help him apply a magical juice from a flower called "love-in-idleness", which makes the victim fall in love with the first living thing he sees when he awakens.

Oberon applies the juice to Titania in order to distract her and force her to give up the page-boy. Having seen Demetrius act cruelly towards Helena, Oberon orders Puck to spread some of the juice on the eyelids of the young Athenian man. Instead, Puck puts the juice on the eyes of Lysander, who then falls in love with Helena. When Oberon finds this out, he makes Puck apply the juice to Demetrius. Due to Puck's errors, Hermia's two lovers temporarily turn against her in favour of Helena. Helena, however, is convinced that her two suitors are mocking her, as neither loved her originally. The four pursue and quarrel with each other all night, losing themselves in the dark and in the maze of their romantic entanglements.


Meanwhile, a band of "rude mechanicals" (lower class labourers) have arranged to perform a crude play about Pyramus and Thisbe for Theseus' wedding and venture into the forest, near Titania's bower, for their rehearsal. Nick Bottom, a stage-struck weaver, is spotted by Puck, who transforms his head into that of an ass (donkey). Titania is awoken by Bottom's singing, and she immediately falls in love with him. She treats him as if he is a nobleman and lavishes attention upon him. While in this state of devotion, she encounters Oberon and casually gives him the Indian boy. Having achieved his goals, Oberon releases Titania and orders Puck to remove the ass's head from Bottom. The magical enchantment is removed from Lysander but is allowed to remain on Demetrius, so that he may reciprocate Helena's love.

The fairies then disappear, and Theseus and Hippolyta arrive on the scene, during an early morning hunt. They wake the lovers, and since Demetrius doesn't love Hermia anymore, Theseus over-rules Egeus's demands and arranges a group wedding. The lovers decide that the night's events must have been a dream. After they all exit, Bottom awakes, and he too decides that he must have experienced a dream "past the wit of man." In Athens, Theseus, Hippolyta and the lovers watch the mechanicals perform "Pyramus and Thisbe." It is ridiculous and badly performed but gives everyone pleasure regardless, and after the mechanicals dance at Bergamasque (rustic dance), everyone retires to bed. Finally, as night falls, Oberon and Titania bless the house, its occupants, and the future children of the newlyweds, and Puck delivers a soliloquy to the audience asking for applause.

Characters



The Court of Athens

Theseus	-	<i>Duke of Athens</i>	
Egeus	-	<i>father to Hermia</i>	
Demetrius	-	<i>in love with Hermia</i>	
Lysander	-	<i>in love with Hermia</i>	
Philostrate	-	<i>Master of the Revels to Theseus</i>	
Hippolyta	-	<i>Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus</i>	
Hermia	-	<i>daughter to Egeus, in love with Lysander</i>	
Helena	-	<i>in love with Demetrius</i>	

The Mechanicals

Quince	-	<i>a Carpenter</i>
Bottom	-	<i>a Weaver</i>
Snug	-	<i>a Joiner</i>
Snout	-	<i>a Tinker</i>
Starveling	-	<i>a Tailor</i>
Flute	-	<i>a Bellows-mender</i>

The Fairies

Oberon	-	<i>King of the Fairies</i>
Titania	-	<i>Queen of the Fairies</i>
Puck	-	<i>servant to Oberon</i>
Peaseblossom	-	<i>servant to Titania</i>
Cobweb	-	<i>servant to Titania</i>
Moth	-	<i>servant to Titania</i>
Mustardseed	-	<i>servant to Titania</i>



A Children's Dream

Here is the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in narrative form. It may be useful for studying the play with a younger audience.

When the path of true love runs smoothly, the world seems a wonderful place - all bright skies and smiling faces. Unfortunately, true love has a habit of wandering off the path and getting lost, and when that happens people's lives get lost too, in a tangle of misery.

Take the love of duke Theseus of Athens and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, for instance. They were to be married, and their happiness spread through the whole of Athens. People had decorated their houses with flowers, and left lamps burning in their windows at night, so that the streets twinkled like a city of stars. everybody was joyful and excited as they prepared to celebrate the Duke's wedding day.

Well, almost everybody....

On the day before the royal wedding, two friends met by chance in the market square: golden-haired Hermia, and black-haired Helena, both beautiful and both with secrets that made their hearts ache.

For a while, the two friends chatted about nothing in particular. Then Helena noticed a look in Hermia's deep blue eyes that made her ask, "Is everything alright Hermia?"

Hermia looked so sad and serious. "I am to marry Demetrius tomorrow" she replied.

"Demetrius!" said Helena softly. Now her heart was aching worse than ever. Night after night she had cried herself to sleep, whispering Demetrius's name, knowing that her love for him was hopeless. Many years ago the families of Hermia and Demetrius had agreed that, when they were of age, their daughter and son should marry. "You must be the happiest young woman in Athens!" Sighed Helena.

"I've never been so miserable in my life!" Hermia declared. "You see, I don't love Demetrius."

"You don't?" Cried Helena, amazed.

"I'm in love with Lysander" Hermia confessed, and she began to describe all the things that made Lysander so wonderful.

Helena thought about Lysander, with his curly brown hair and broad smile. He was *quite* handsome, she supposed, but he didn't have Demetrius's dark, brooding good looks. Why on earth did Hermia find him so attractive?

"Of course, I told my father that I didn't wish to marry Demetrius," Hermia said, "and he went straight to him to explain - but you know how stubborn Demetrius can be. He lost his temper and said it didn't matter who I loved, our marriage had been arranged and it must go ahead no matter what. His stupid pride's been hurt, that's all - he doesn't love me a bit."

"Then who does he love?" Helena enquired eagerly.

"No one except for himself," said Hermia. "I *can't* marry someone I don't love, and I know it will cause a scandal, but Lysander and I are going to run away together!"

"When?" Helena asked.

"Tonight" Hermia told her. "I'm meeting him at midnight in the wood outside the city walls. We plan to travel through the night, and in the morning we'll find a little temple where we can be married. Oh, Helena, it will be so *romantic*! Please say that you're happy for me!"

"Of course I am," said Helena. "I'm overjoyed."

And she was overjoyed - for herself. 'At last, this is my chance!' she thought. 'If I visit Demetrius tonight and tell him that Hermia and Lysander have gone off together, he'll forget about his pride...and then... when I tell him how I feel about him, he'll be so flattered, he'll fall in love with me. Love always finds a way!'

Which is true, but love doesn't always find the way that people expect, as Helena was about to find out. For it was not only in the human world that love was causing unhappiness; although Helena and Hermia did not know it, two different worlds would meet in the wood outside Athens that night, and the result would be Chaos.

Oberon, King of the Fairies, was a creature of darkness and shadows, while his wife, Queen Titania, was moonlight and silver. The two loved each other dearly, but they had quarrelled bitterly. Titania had taken a little orphan boy as a page, and made such a fuss of the lad that Oberon had become very jealous. He wanted the page for himself.

That midsummer's night, in a clearing in the wood, Titania was singing to her page, while fairy servants fluttered around her like glittering moths. When Oberon appeared, Titania's silvery eyes darkened. "Fairies, let us leave this place at once!" she said haughtily.

"Wait Titania!" Snapped Oberon. "This quarrel of ours has gone on long enough. You say I have no reason to be jealous of the boy - very well, prove it! Give him to me!"

"Not for all your fairy kingdom!" hissed Titania. She raised her left hand, and sent a ball of blue fire roaring across the glade, straight at Oberon's head.

Oberon spoke a word of magic, and the fire turned to water that burst over him, drenching his clothes. By the time he had rubbed the water from his eyes, the glade was empty and Oberon was alone. "I'll make you sorry for this, Titania!" he vowed. Then, lifting his dripping head, he called out, "Puck? Come to me, now!"

A breeze sighed in the branches, as an elf dropped out of the air and landed at Oberon's feet. The elf was dressed in leaves that had been sewn together. His hair was tangled, his skin as brown as chestnuts, and when he smiled, his white teeth flashed mischievously. "Command me, master!" Puck said.

"I mean to teach the Queen a lesson," said Oberon. "Go, search the earth and fetch me the flower called Love in Idleness."

"I will fly faster than a falling star!" said Puck, and with that he had vanished.

A cruel smile played on Oberon's lips. "When Titania is asleep, I will drop the juice of the flower in her eyes," he said to himself. "Its magic will make her fall in love with the first living thing she sees when she wakes - perhaps a toad, or even a spider! She will make herself seem so ridiculous, that she will beg me to break the spell, and I will...after she's given me the page!"

This plan pleased Oberon so much that he began to laugh - but his laugh was cut short when he heard human voices approaching. With a wave of his fingers, Oberon made himself vanish among the shadows.



Demetrius, out searching for Hermia, halted in the middle of the glade, while he considered which path to take. This gave Helena a chance to catch up with him. "Wait for me Demetrius!" she pleaded.

Demetrius scowled at her. "For the last time, Helena, go home!" he shouted angrily. "I can find Lysander and Hermia without your help."

"But you don't understand!" Helena exclaimed. "I love you! I've always loved you!"

She tried to put her arms around Demetrius, but he ducked away. "Well I don't love you!" he said roughly. "So go away and leave me alone!" And he ran off through the moonlight.

"Oh Demetrius!" sobbed Helena, running after him. "I would follow you through fire, just to be near you!"

When the glade was once more still and silent, Oberon came out of the darkness. His face was thoughtful. "I must help that lovely maiden!" he whispered. "I know how cruel it is to love someone whose heart is so cold."

A wind brushed the Fairy King's cheek, and there stood Puck, holding a sprig of glimmering white flowers.

"Take two blossoms and search the woods for a young human couple," Oberon said to him.

"Squeeze the juice of the petals into the young man's eyes, but do it when you are sure that the maiden will be the first thing he sees."

"At once, master!" Puck said with a bow, and then he was gone.

Then Oberon went to find Titania. He found her sleeping alone on a bank of violets, and the air was heavy with their sweet perfume. As he dropped juice from the magic flowers onto Titania's eyelids, Oberon murmured:

"What you see when you awake,
Do it for your true love take!"

At that very moment, in another part of the wood, Puck was putting magic juice into the eyes of a young man he had found sleeping next to a young woman at the foot of a pine tree.

"When he wakes and sees her, his love for her will drive him mad!" Puck giggled, and he leapt into the air, like a grasshopper in a summer meadow.

But as bad luck would have it, Puck had found the wrong couple. Those sleeping under the tree were Lysander and Hermia, who had got lost in the wood and exhausted themselves trying to find the way out.

And as bad luck would also have it, a few seconds after Puck had left them, Helena wandered by, searching for Demetrius. Blinded by tears, Helena did not notice Lysander and Hermia until she stumbled over Lysander's legs. He woke, saw her, and his eyes bulged like a frog's as the magic went to work.

"Lysander?" gasped Helena. "What are you doing here? I mean, you mustn't be here! Get away quickly! Demetrius is looking for you, and if he finds you..." Her voice trailed off - there was a strange look about Lysander, and it made her feel uncomfortable. "Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked.

"Because at last I have found my own true love," said Lysander. "Helena, can't you see how much I love you?"

Helena stepped back, laughing nervously. "Don't be silly, Lysander!" she said. "You love Hermia... don't you?"

"Hermia, who is she?" scoffed Lysander, scrambling to his feet. "How could I love anyone but you, with your eyes like stars, your hair as black as ravens' wings, and your skin as soft as...?"

"That's quite enough of that!" said Helena. "This is some sort of midsummer madness!"

"Madness? Yes, I'm mad!" said Lysander. "Mad with love for you! Come to my arms, and cool the fires of my passion with your kisses!"

He moved towards Helena, but she turned and fled. Lysander followed her, shouting, "there's no escape from love Helena! This was meant to be!"

Their loud voices and pounding footsteps woke Hermia. "Lysander, where are you?" she muttered sleepily. "Don't wander off on your own, my love. You might be eaten by a lion, or a bear..." The very thought made her wide awake, and she sat up. "Or I might be eaten, come to that!" she said with a shudder. "I'm coming to find you, Lysander, so we can be eaten together!"

Not five paces from the bank of violets where Titania lay asleep, a group of Athenians had gathered in secret to rehearse a play that they meant to perform for Duke Theseus after his wedding. One of the actors, a weaver called Bottom, was behind a tree, waiting to appear when he heard his cue. "I'll show them how it's done!" Bottom said to himself. "When the Duke sees what a fine actor I am, he'll give me a purse of gold, or my name's not Nick Bottom!"

He glanced up, and saw a strange orange light circling the tree.

"Now what's that, I wonder?" he muttered. "A firefly perhaps?"

It was Puck. He had noticed the actors as he flew by on his way back to Oberon, and had seen a chance to make mischief. "Behold, the Queen's new love!" he said. Magic sparks showered down from his fingertips on to the weaver.

Immediately Bottom's face began to sprout hair, and his nose and ears grew longer. His body was unchanged, so Bottom had no idea that anything was wrong, until he heard his cue and stepped out from behind a tree.



Bottom had meant his entrance to be dramatic, and it certainly was. The other actors took one look at the donkey-headed monster coming towards them, and raced away screaming and shouting.

"What's the matter with them?" said Bottom, scratching his chin. "My word, my beard has grown quickly today!" He paced this way and that, puzzling out why his friends had left in such a hurry. "O-o-h! I see-haw, hee-haw!" he said at last. "They're trying to frighten me by leaving me alone in the wood in the dark! Well it won't work! It takes more than that to frighten a man like me-haw, hee-haw!"

And to prove how brave he was, Bottom began to sing. his voice was part human, part donkey and it sounded like the squealing of rusty hinges. It woke Queen Titania from her sleep on the bank of violets.

"Do I hear an angel singing?" she said, and raised herself on one elbow and gazed at Bottom. "Adorable human, I have fallen wildly in love with you!" she told him.

"Really?" said Bottom, not the least alarmed by the sudden appearance of the Fairy Queen. He was sure it was all part of the trick his friends were playing.

"Sit beside me, so I can stroke your long, silky ears!" Titania purred. "My servants will bring you anything you desire."

"I wouldn't say no to some supper," said Bottom. "Nothing fancy - a bale of hay or a bag of oats would suit me fine!"

From up above came the sound of Puck's laughter, like the pealing of tiny bells.

Oberon's laughter set every owl in the wood hooting. "My proud Queen, in love with a donkey?" he cried. "Well done, Puck! Titania will think twice before she defies me again! But what of the humans?"

"I did as you commanded, master," said Puck. "I found them..."

A voice made him turn his head, and he saw Demetrius stamping along the path, dragging Hermia by the arm.

"That is the fellow!" said Oberon. "But who is that with him?"

"He is not the one I cast a spell on!" Puck yelped.

"Quickly," said Oberon. "Make yourself invisible before they see us!"

Hermia was thoroughly miserable. Everything had gone wrong: she had found Demetrius instead of Lysander, and Demetrius was in such a foul temper that she feared the worst. "Oh, where is Lysander?" she wailed. "You've killed him, haven't you, you brute?"

With a weary groan, Demetrius let Hermia go and slumped to the ground.

"I haven't touched your precious Lysander!" he yawned. "Now stop whining and get some sleep. When it's light, we'll find our way out of this accursed wood."

"I won't rest until I find Lysander!" Hermia said defiantly.

"Just as you wish," said Demetrius. "I'm too tired to argue any more."

He lay back among the ferns and closed his eyes. He heard Hermia walking away, and then he fell into a deep sleep.

Moonlight shifted and shivered as Oberon and Puck reappeared. "This is the man," said Oberon, peering down at Demetrius. "Search the wood for a black-haired maiden, and bring her here. When she is close by I will put magic in his eyes and wake him."

"Yes, master! But tell me, is human love always so complicated?" Puck asked curiously.

"Just do as I have commanded" snapped Oberon.

Helena was still running, with Lysander just a few steps behind her. So many bewildering things happened to her, that when an orange light appeared above the path in front of her, she was not surprised - in fact, a curious idea suddenly popped into her mind - Puck's magic had put it there. Helena became convinced that if she followed the light, it would lead her back to Athens, and sanity. Over streams and through clearings the light led her, until at last she came to a deep thicket of ferns, where she paused for breath,

"Helena, marry me!" she heard Lysander shout.

"I don't want you!" she shouted back, "I want Demetrius!"

"And here I am, my love!!" said Demetrius, springing up out of the ferns nearby, his eyes glowing with magic. "Hold me, let me melt in your sweetness!"

Helena did not bother to wonder why Demetrius had changed his mind: her dreams had come true, and she was about to rush into his arms when Lysander ran between them.

"Keep away from her, Demetrius!" Lysander said hotly. "Helena is mine!"

"Lysander... is that you?" called a voice, and Hermia came stumbling out of the bushes. Brambles had torn the hem of her dress, and there were leaves and twigs stuck in her hair. "Thank the gods you're safe!" she said, weeping for joy. "Why did you leave me, my only love?"

"Because I can't bear the sight of you!" said Lysander. "I want to marry Helena."

"So do I!" Demetrius exclaimed. "And since she can't marry both of us, we'll have to settle the matter, man to man!"

He pushed Lysander's chest, knocking him backwards, then Lysander pushed Demetrius.

Hermia stared at Helena, her eyes blazing. "You witch! You've stolen my Lysander!" she screeched.

"I haven't stolen anybody!" Helena replied angrily. "This is all some cruel trick, isn't it? The three of you plotted together to make a fool of me - and I thought you were my friend!"

"Our friendship ended when you took Lysander away from me!" snarled Hermia.

And there might have been a serious fight, if Oberon had not cast a sleeping spell on all four of them. They dropped to the ground like ripe apples, Hermia falling close to Lysander and Helena collapsing at Demetrius's side.

Oberon and Puck appeared magically beside them.

"Smear their eyes with fairy juice!" said Oberon. "This knot of lovers will unravel when they wake."

As Puck hurried about his task, the air was filled with the singing of fairy voices. "The Queen!" Puck muttered in alarm. "The Queen is coming!"

Titania did not notice Puck and Oberon, or the sleeping lovers. She could see nothing but Bottom, whose jaws were stretched open in a wide yawn. "Are you weary, dearest one?" she asked him tenderly. "Rest with me on these soft ferns."

"I feel a powerful sleep coming over me-haw, hee-haw!" said Bottom.

"Fairies, leave us!" ordered Titania.

The fairies flew away, leaving bright trails in the air. Titania cradled Bottom's head in her lap, and they both dozed.

Oberon and Puck crept close. Puck began to grin, but he stopped when he saw the sorrow in his master's eyes.

"There is no laughter in this!" Oberon sighed. "How I long for Titania to smile at me, as she smiled at this creature, and to feel her soft arms around me as I sleep! Break the spell on the human, Puck, while I deal with the Queen."

Oberon moved his hands, weaving shadows into magic as he chanted:

"Be the way you used to be,
See the way you used to see,
Wake, my Queen, and come to me!"



Titania opened her eyes, and when she saw Oberon she flew straight into his arms. "I am so glad that you are here, my love!" she said. "I had the strangest dream! I dreamed that I had fallen in love with a..."

"We will never quarrel again," Oberon promised. "Keep your page - have fifty pages if you wish! What does it matter, as long as we are together?"

Puck saw that the sky was getting lighter. "It's almost dawn, master!" he warned.

"Then we must leave!" said Oberon, and he, Titania and Puck faded into the pale morning light.

When the sun rose, its light woke Demetrius and Helena, who fell in love at first sight, then Lysander and Hermia, who fell in love all over again. There was much smiling, sighing and kissing, and soon Demetrius said, "Today is Duke Theseus's wedding day, as well as mine and Helena's. Come, my friends, the priest can marry us all at the same ceremony!"

And the lovers hurried off towards Athens, laughing every step of the way, the paths of their true love running smoothly at last.

And as for Bottom, he woke some time later and clambered stiffly to his feet. "I thought I was...!" He mumbled. "I thought I had...!" Anxiously, he felt his face and ears, and then sighed with relief. "What a midsummer night's dream!" he exclaimed. "I'll write a poem about it, and read it to Duke Theseus and his bride, and the Duke will say: 'Well done, noble Bottom! Here's some gold for you!'"

And he stumbled away through the ferns, making up lines of poetry and reciting them out loud as he went.

Commentary and Analysis

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a romantic comedy by William Shakespeare written sometime in the 1590s. It portrays the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and a group of amateur actors, their interactions with the Duke and Duchess of Athens. Theseus and Hippolyta, and with fairies who inhabit a moonlit forest. The play is one of Shakespeare's most popular and is widely performed across the world.

Source

There is no known source for the plot of A Midsummer Night's Dream, although individual elements can be traced to classical literature; for example, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is told in Ovid's Metamorphoses and the transformation of Bottom into an ass is descended from Apuleius' The Golden Ass; Shakespeare would have studied both texts at school. In addition, Shakespeare could have been working on Romeo and Juliet at about the same time that he wrote the Dream, and it is possible to see Pyramus and Thisbe as a comic reworking of the tragic play. A further, frequently ignored source is The Night's Tale in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Date and Text

It is not known exactly when A Midsummer Night's Dream was written or first performed, but, on the basis of topical references and an allusion to Spenser's Epithalamion, it is usually dated in 1595 or 1596. Some have theorized that the play might have been written for an aristocratic wedding; numerous such weddings took place in 1596, while others suggest it was written for the Queen to celebrate the feast day of St. John, but no concrete evidence exists to link the play with either of them. In either case, it would also have been performed at The Theatre, and later, The Globe in London.

The play was entered into the Register of the Stationers Company on October 8, 1600 by the bookseller Thomas Fisher, who published the first quarto edition later that year. A second quarto was printed in 1619 by William Jaggard, as part of his so-called False Folio. The play next appeared in print in the First Folio of 1623. The title page of Q1 states that the play was "sundry times publicly acted" prior to 1600. The first performance known with certainty occurred at Court on the 1st January, 1604.

Performance History

17th and 18th centuries

During the years of the Puritan Interregnum when the theatres were closed (1642-60), the comic subplot of Bottom and his compatriots was performed as a "droll." Drolls were comical playlets, often adapted from the subplots of Shakespearean and other plays, that could be attached to the acts of acrobats and jugglers and other allowed performances, thus circumventing the ban against drama.

When the theatres re-opened in 1660, A Midsummer Night's Dream was acted in adapted form, like many other Shakespearean plays. Samuel Pepys saw it on September 29, 1662, and thought it "The most insipid, ridiculous play that I have ever saw...."

After the Jacobean/Caroline era, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was never performed in its entirety until the 1840s. Instead, it was heavily adapted in forms like Henry Purcell's musical masque/play *The Fairy Queen* (1692). Richard Leveridge turned the Pyramus and Thisbe scenes into an Italian opera burlesque, acted at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1716. John Frederick Lampe elaborated upon Leveridge's version in 1745. Charles Johnson had used the Pyramus and Thisbe material in the finale of *Love in a Forest*, his 1723 adaption of *As You Like It*. In 1755, David Garrick did the opposite of what had been done a century earlier: he extracted Bottom and his companions and acted the rest, in an adaption called *The Fairies*. Frederic Reynolds produced an operatic version in 1816.

The Victorian stage

In 1840 Madame Vestris at Covent Garden returned the play to the stage with a relatively full text, but padded it out greatly with musical sequences and balletic dances. Vestris took the role of Oberon, and for the next seventy years, Oberon and Puck would always be played by women. After the success of Vestris' production, nineteenth century theatre continued to treat the *Dream* as an opportunity for huge spectacle, often with a cast numbering nearly one hundred. Huge, detailed sets were created for the palace and the forest, and the fairies tended to be envisaged as gossamer-winged ballerinas. The much-loved overture by Felix Mendelssohn was always used throughout this period, with the text often being cut to provide greater space for music and dance. Augustin Daly's production opened in 1895 in London and ran for 21 performances. The special effects were constructed by the famous Martinka Magic Company, which was later owned by Houdini. Herbert Beerbohm Tree staged a 1911 production with live rabbits.

Granville-Barker and Max Reinhardt

In the early twentieth century, a reaction against this huge spectacle emerged. Innovative director Harley Granville-Barker introduced in 1914 the modern way of staging the *Dream*: he removed the huge casts and Mendelssohn, using instead Elizabethan folk music. He replaced the huge sets with a simple system of patterned curtains. He used a completely original vision of the fairies, seeing them as golden robotic insectoid creatures based on Cambodian idols. This increased simplicity and emphasis on directional imagination has dominated subsequent *Dreams* on the stage.

Max Reinhardt staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thirteen times between 1905 and 1934, introducing a revolving set. After he fled Germany he devised a more spectacular outdoor version at the Hollywood Bowl, in September 1934. The shell was removed and replaced by a "forest" planted in tons of dirt hauled in especially for the event, and a trestle was constructed from the hills to the stage. The wedding procession inserted between Act IV and V crossed a trestle with torches down the hillside. The cast included John David Lodge, William Farnum, Sterling Holloway, 18 year old Olivia de Havilland, and Mickey Rooney, with Erich Wolfgang Korngold's orchestrations of Mendelssohn. (The young Austrian composer would go on to make a Hollywood career.) On the strength of this production, Warner Brothers signed Reinhardt to direct a filmed version, Hollywood's first Shakespeare event since Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford's *Taming of the Shrew* (1929). Rooney (Puck) and De Havilland (Hermia) were the only hold-overs from the cast.

Brook and after

Another landmark production was that of Peter Brook in 1970. Brook swept away every tradition associated with the play, staging it in a blank white box, in which masculine fairies engaged in circus tricks such as trapeze artistry. Brook also introduced the subsequently popular idea of doubling Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania, as if to suggest that the world of the fairies is a mirror version of the world of the mortals. Since Brook's production, directors have felt free to use their imaginations freely to decide for themselves what the play's story means, and to represent that visually on stage. In particular, there has been an increased amount of sexuality on stage, as many directors see the 'palace' as a symbol of restraint and repression, while the 'wood' can be a symbol of wild, unrestrained sexuality, which is both liberating and terrifying.

Themes

Love's Difficulty

Though most of the conflict in the play stems from the troubles of romance, and though the play involves a number of romantic elements, it is not truly a love story; it distances the audience from the emotions of the characters in order to poke fun at the torments and afflictions that those in love suffer. The tone of the play is so lighthearted that the audience never doubts that things will end happily, and it is therefore free to enjoy the comedy without being caught up in the tension of an uncertain outcome.

The theme of love's difficulty is often explored through the motif of love out of balance - that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship. The prime instance of this imbalance is the asymmetrical love among the four young Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius, and Demetrius loves Hermia instead of Helena - a simple numeric imbalance in which two men love the same woman, leaving one woman with too many suitors and one with too few. The play has strong potential for a traditional outcome, and the plot is in many ways based on a quest for internal balance; that is, when the lover's tangle resolves itself into symmetrical pairings, the traditional happy ending will have been achieved. Somewhat similarly, in the relationship between Titania and Oberon, an imbalance arises out of the fact that Oberon's coveting of Titania's Indian boy outweighs his love for her. Later, Titania's passion for the ass-headed Bottom represents an imbalance of appearance and nature: Titania is beautiful and graceful, while Bottom is clumsy and grotesque.

Magic

The fairies' magic, which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play, is another element central to the fantastic atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare uses magic both to embody the almost supernatural power of love (symbolised by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. Although the misuse of magic causes chaos, as when Puck mistakenly applies the love potion to Lysander's eyelids, magic ultimately resolves the play's tensions by restoring love to balance among the quartet of Athenian youths. Additionally, the ease with which Puck uses magic to his own ends, as when he reshapes Bottom's head into that of an ass and recreates the voices of Lysander and Demetrius. Stands in contrast to the laboriousness and gracelessness of the craftsmen's attempt to stage their play.

Dreams

As the title suggests, dreams are an important theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; they are linked to the bizarre, magical mishaps in the forest. Hippolyta's first words in the play evidence the prevalence of dreams ("Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time"), and various characters mention dreams throughout. The theme of dreaming recurs predominately when characters attempt to explain bizarre events in which these characters are involved: "I have had a dream, past the wit of any man to say what this dream was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream," Bottom says, unable to fathom the magical happenings that have affected him as anything but the result of slumber.

Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams, in how events occur without explanation, how time loses its normal sense of flow, and the impossible occurs as a matter of course; he seeks to recreate this environment in the play through the intervention of the fairies in the magical forest. At the end of the play, Puck extends the idea of dreams to the audience, saying that, if they have been offended by anything they have seen in the play, they should remember it as nothing more than a dream. This sense of illusion and gauzy fragility is crucial to the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it helps render the play a fantastical experience rather than a heavy drama.

Motifs

Contrast

The idea of contrast is the basic building block of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The entire play is constructed around groups of opposites and doubles. Nearly every characteristic presented in the play has an opposite: Helena is tall whereas Hermia is short; Titania is beautiful whereas Bottom is grotesque; Puck plays pranks and Bottom is the victim of pranks. Further, the three main sets of characters (who are developed from sources as varied as Greek mythology, English folklore, and classical literature) are designed to contrast powerfully with one another: the fairies are graceful and magical, while the workmen are clumsy and earthy; the workmen are merry, while the lovers are overly serious. Contrast serves as the defining visual characteristic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the play's most indelible image being that of the beautiful, delicate Titania weaving flowers into the hair of the ass-headed Bottom. It seems impossible to imagine two figures less compatible with each other. The juxtaposition of extraordinary differences is the most important characteristic of the play's surreal atmosphere and is thus perhaps the play's central motif; there is no scene in which extraordinary contrast is not present.

Symbols

The Love Potion

The love potion is made from the juice of a flower that was struck with one of Cupid's misfired arrows; it is used by the fairies to wreak romantic havoc throughout Acts II, III and IV. Because the meddling fairies are careless with the love potion, the situation of the young Athenian lovers becomes increasingly chaotic and confusing (Demetrius and Lysander are magically compelled to transfer their love from Hermia to Helena), and Titania is hilariously humiliated (she is magically compelled to fall deeply in love with the ass-head Bottom). The love potion thus becomes a symbol of the unreasoning, fickle, erratic and undeniably powerful nature of love, which can lead to inexplicable and bizarre behaviour and cannot be resisted.

The Play-within-a-play



The workmen's play, that takes up most of Act V, scene I, is used to represent, in condensed form, many of the important ideas and themes of the main plot. Because the workmen are such bumbling actors, their performance satirizes the melodramatic Athenian lovers and gives the play a purely joyful, comedic ending. Pyramus and Thisbe face parental disapproval in the play, just as Hermia and Lysander do; the theme of romantic confusion enhanced by the darkness of night is rehearsed, as Pyramus mistakenly believes that Thisbe has been killed by the lion, just as the Athenian lovers experience intense misery because of the mix-ups caused by the fairies' meddling. The workmen's

play is, therefore, a kind of symbol for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself: a story involving powerful emotions that is made hilarious by its comical presentation.

Activities

Still Pictures

Split the class into groups of six. If there are not enough children to create one picture per group, then continue the exercise but with each group creating all of the following pictures.

1. Lysander and Hermia are in love, looking at each other. Demetrius is angry (due to Hermia not loving him). Helena is upset (due to Demetrius not loving her). Puck and Oberon are looking on in amazement **or** Oberon pushing Puck forward to sort it all out.
2. Oberon and Puck versus Titania and two attendant fairies (Mustardseed and Cobweb). The changeling boy is in the middle. (Tug of war style picture).
3. Puck changing Bottom into an ass, with four of the Mechanicals running away, afraid.
4. Titania in love with Bottom (as the ass), four attendant fairies (Mustardseed, Peaseblossom, Cobweb and Moth) looking on, puzzled.
5. Three happy couples getting married: Theseus and Hippolyta, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena.

As an extension to this exercise, use sections of the text. Once the children have created all of the above pictures, have them show the picture to the group and then un-freeze to continue the scene of the picture they are presenting.

Lovers/Fairies

This exercise will allow the children to create an improvisation based on the events of the play, and will aid their understanding of the events. Allocate the roles of the Lovers to four members of the group. All other children will play the roles of the fairies.

The improvisation should show the different and changing relationships as dictated by the fairies.

- Lysander and Hermia love each other. Demetrius loves Hermia. Helena loves Demetrius.
- Fairies put the juice of the flower onto Lysander's eyelids.
- Lysander loves Helena. Helena loves Demetrius. Demetrius loves Hermia. Hermia loves Lysander.
- Fairies put the juice of the flower onto Demetrius's eyelids.
- Lysander and Demetrius both love Helena. Hermia loves Lysander.
- Fairies put the juice of the flower onto Lysander's eyelids.
- Helena and Demetrius love each other. Lysander and Hermia love each other.

Exploring Setting

Below we have included a modern interpretation of the first Mechanical scene in Act I. Ask the children to read the scene and then think about a possible setting for this scene and their reasons for doing so. They may wish to look at some of the following examples

- The local Tavern/pub
- On a building site
- Peter Quince's House

Quince: Are we all here then?

Bottom: You had better check, Pete - read out the cast list.

Quince: Right! Here it is. This is the cast list for our play. The one we're putting on for the Duke and Duchess on their wedding night.

Bottom: Great, tell us what the play's about and then tell us which parts we're playing.

Quince: The play is called "A funny thing happened to Pyramus and Thisbe, and then they dropped dead."

Bottom: What a cracking title! And it's funny, I'll bet. Wait and you'll see I'm right.

Quince: Answer when I call you...Nick Bottom? Nick Bottom?

Bottom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm here, who am I playing?

Quince: You are playing Pyramus

Bottom: Who's he when he's at home> Is he a goodie or a baddie?

Quince: He's the romantic lead, and he kills himself.

Bottom: Oh great. I'll have them crying, just you wait and see. Tears, they'll weep buckets. I'll have them wringing out their hankies before I'm finished. Romantic, eh? That's me alright.

Quince: Fine. Frank Flute?

Flute: Here, Pete.

Quince: Frank, you're playing Thisbe.

Flute: Who's he then? A soldier?

Quince: He's a she, a female, a woman, the girl Pyramus loves.

Flute: Ger on wi' yer. I'm not playing a woman. What will the lads down the club say? Anyway, I'm growing a beard.

Quince: What's that got to do with it? Anyway, we'll put a bag over your head. And you can talk with a squeaky voice.

Bottom: I could do that. Go on, let me do it. Look, I'll show you (*in a high pitched voice*) "Pyramus, Pyramus, Pyramus, my darling, my sweet, it is me, your Thisbe".

Quince: No. You're Pyramus and that's the end of it.

Bottom: Huh.

Quince: Robin Starveling?

Starveling: What?

Quince: You're playing Thisbe's Mam.

Starveling: But...

Quince: Tom Snout?

Snout: You're playing Pyramus' dad, I'm Thisbe's dad and snug's playing. . .well, the Lion.

Snug: A Lion? Have you got it all wrote out 'cos it takes me a long time to learn owt.

Quince: I wouldn't worry. All you have to do is roar.

Bottom: I could do that. Listen, listen. I'll roar so well, they'll say - roar some more.

Quince: Aye, and you'll roar so much you'd frighten all the women out of their wits, and we'd all be for the high jump.

Bottom: No way! I'll roar politely, I'll roar. . .

Quince: On your bike Bottom, you're playing Pyramus, whether you like it or not. It's a good part, the lead, suit you down to the ground. So you're playing Pyramus. Full stop. End of story. Finish. Fenito Benito. O. K?

Bottom: I suppose so. Can I wear a wig?

Quince: If you like.

Bottom: What colour?

Quince: What colour? What colour? Oh any colour you like.

Bottom: How about an orange one, or a purple one, or a yellow one. . .

Quince: Look. It doesn't really matter. Now, here are your parts. And I'm telling you, no I'm asking you, no I'm begging you to LEARN them. Meet me a mile out of town in the wood at, say, ten tonight. We'll rehearse it then. If we meet in town we'll have the life moithered out of us. I'll get a list of props together. BE THERE - RIGHT?

Bottom: Of course we will.

All: Yeah, of course we will.

Bottom: I want to rehearse this play properly. Make sure you all learn your lines like me.

Quince: We'll meet in the car park of the Duke's Oak at nine.

Bottom: Fine, go on then, clear off and learn you lines if you're going to be in my play.

(Exeunt)

Preparing the role of Oberon

This is a character exercise to understand the motives behind a character's actions.

Make notes on how you think he should be played in each scene in which he appears. Decide how you think he develops during the play.

- Record details of any changes of costume and make up needed .
- Collect examples of the language he uses. How it changes depending on who he is speaking to. Also look at the changes of language he uses when speaking to different characters at different times.
- Make a list of what he does in the play - actions reveal character.
- Explore the motives of the character by 'hot-seating' him. One person takes on the role and sits in the hot-seat while others question him about his motives and actions in the play.

Some Questions for Hot-seating Prospero

- Do you actually want the Changeling boy, or are you jealous of Titania?
- Are you in love with Hippolyta?
- Why do you involve the Lovers in your quest to embarrass Titania by making her fall in love with an ass-headed Bottom?
- Are you angry at Puck for putting the flower juice on the wrong Athenian?
- What do you want to happen at the end of the play?

It is usually best if the teacher begins the questioning. As the child playing the role of Oberon in this exercise becomes more confident at answering the questions, let the rest of the group question him. The same process could be repeated for any of the other characters in the play.

Taking Control

The fairies control a lot of the actions of the lovers while in the forest. Similarly, Egeus tries to control Hermia's actions with regards to who she should marry.

Working with a partner, one person stands in a neutral stance while the other controls their movements with a piece of imaginary string, lifting/dropping the elbow, leg, head, shoulders etc. with these pieces of string.

The puppet master can cut the strings at any time they wish, with their partner responding to this.

The Puppet Master can move their partner around the room, up and down, and in any direction they wish.

Ensure that both pairs have the opportunity to experience being both puppet and master.