

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## A Midsummer Night's Dream 1594-1596

Shakespeare

### OVERVIEW

This play centers around the marriage of King Theseus of Athens and Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, who has been taken captive, but is in love with her captor, Theseus. Around this central activity swirl the love affairs of four young Athenians and six 'rude mechanicals,' or tradespeople, from Athens, who are preparing a play which they hope King Theseus will choose, to honor his marriage festivities. The activities of both the lovers and the 'mechanicals' are manipulated by the Faeries who live in the Forest, where most of the events of the play take place. We see at once that this play is a comedy, happy in ending, but chock full of antics along the way.

### CHARACTERS

*Four lovers* (Hermia, Lysander, Helena, Demetrius)

Theseus, Duke of Athens

Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons

Egeus, father to Hermia

Philostrate, Theseus' master of revels

Mechanicals

Nick Bottom. weaver

Peter Quince carpenter

Francis Flute. bellows mender

Tom Snout. tinker

Snug. joiner

Robin Starveling. Tailor

Oberon, King of the fairies

Titania, Queen of the fairies

Robin Goodfellow. A 'puck' or hobgoblin

*Fairies attendant upon Titania* (Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, Mustard seed)

### STORY

The story opens in the kind of constraint free, imagination generated fantasy land—a misty archaic Athens, a full set of classic rustics, timeless in Shakespeare's sense, four lovers bewitched by the constraints imposed on them by one of their dads, and a full complement of fairies filling the woods (which themselves, nestled as they are close to Athens, are like the removed, placid and fertile woods of, say, Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, the fancied Forest of Arden.) The constraint-free element picks up on the high frivolity preparations of King Theseus for his soon upcoming marriage with the very willing, though captive, Amazon bride, Hippolyta: preparations are in high gear at the palace, when a surprise visit enters the picture, a visit from Egeus, the father of Hermia, one of the two pairs of lovers currently surrounding the royal couple at court.

**Marriage.** Egeus brings with him a difficult complaint, that his daughter, Hermia, refuses to marry the fine young man, Demetrius, whom he has destined her for. Hermia is instead in love with Lysander, and is

determined to wed no one but him, although the penalties, for disobeying her father's wish in these matters, are severe: either death or enclosure in a nunnery for the rest of her life. The man that Hermia loves, Lysander, is totally unacceptable to her father, and consequently the loving pair decides they will have to elope. Demetrius, meanwhile, is deeply in love with Hermia—which makes matters worse—and Helena, the fourth member of the two pairs, is in love with Lysander who has no interest in her. It will take the whole play, and many a confusion, before this mis-set group of four are rearranged, as they will be, to suit both themselves and the elders.

**Mechanicals.** The lovers of the above scenario have their tryst and amour plans set on a forest near Athens, as have the 'rude mechanical' tradespeople, who are practicing their play, 'Pyramus and Thisbe,' for the Duke's consideration for the dramatic showpiece of his marriage; a play involving a tragic misunderstanding and the death of love. The discombobulations of language, comical misunderstanding, and tomfoolery, which accompany the mechanicals' dramatic preparations, fill up another tier of forest episode, as finally do the forest dwellers themselves, the fairies, who are the original dwellers of the place.

**Fairies.** While the mechanicals dispute about who gets what lines, and how they should deal with them, the fairy King and Queen, Oberon and Titania, are disputing over the Queen's new boyfriend, an 'Indian changeling,' of whom Oberon is very jealous. The kind of way the diverging plot themes, in this very Shakespearian comedy, finally coalesce, is exemplified by the kind of revenge Oberon takes on Titania, using his buddy Puck to drop Oberon into sleep on a flowery bank, from which—this is the plot—she will fall for the first person she sees upon waking, who in the present case will be Bottom, one of the rude mechanicals, transformed into an ass' head. Perhaps the richest harvest of confusion cum clarity, in the ensuing pell mell, is that which leads the four lovers to match up, fall out with, then rematch again in a dance of identities which turns love itself into a charivari of possibilities, in which one pairing is as good as another.

**Conclusion.** Happy ending all around, of course. The mechanicals' play is just that kind of natural charm and genius that Theseus wants. Oberon and Titania have gotten things sorted out, and Oberon is again the only face his wife will look at. The mechanicals are on top of the world, as their play has been praised. Above all the lovers are restored to their desired positions. The marriage initially demanded by Egeus is good to go, as is the marriage of Helena and Demetrius. A point to ponder has been embedded in the audience. Is love a unique relation between two mutually discovering people, or is love a neutral commodity, joining any two persons.

## THEMES

**Love.** From the outset, this play is concerned with weddings, marriages, the state of married couples (the King and Queen of the Fairies) and the realization that the course of true love does not flow smoothly. Even the King and Queen of the Fairies, who have been long married, appear to us enmeshed in fatuous quarrels. But the beauty of love, in a Shakespearean comedy, is that it can quickly restore imperfections in its own fabric, and remake itself whole again.

**Reality.** If there is a base level of reality, in the present play, it lies with Theseus, whom for lack of a better we have chosen as 'main character.' The court of Athens, though set in a medieval post classical dreamland, has real people in it—admittedly the lady, Hippolyta, is a 'captured Amazon'—with problems as real as those Egeus is soon to present, culture and practice conflicts which are as contemporary as we ourselves. On a scale of descending realities—from most to least 'real'—we might read in this order: the lovers, the rude mechanicals, the fairies, and perhaps the characters invested in the Pyramus and Thisbe play. Irrealities within irrealities form the structure of this play.

**Imagination.** At the beginning of Act V Theseus launches into an upgrade language which greatly raises our admiration for him, as we realize that he has all along, throughout the play, been not only a riotously happy remarrier, but a profound observer of what the play has been about. Theseus expresses his own fascinated discovery of how much more there is than 'cool reason' when it comes to 'comprehension.'

Lovers and madmen can be our instructors here, for they are 'of imagination all compact.' To this list of two Theseus adds the poet:

'as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.'

Playing over hallowed bodies of thought—the Christian notion of 'creatio ex nihilo'; the Greco Roman theory of the images and forms of things, which 'represent' them—and thinking into the future theorist, Coleridge, whose *Biographia Literaria* further up grades the Shakespearian subtlety of aesthetic—Shakespeare takes his brilliant place among the world's finest theorists of the arts.

**Dream** The entire play is cast as a dream, from the initial setting in an ancient Athens that never was, to a forest full of coincidental and magical events, to a finale in which Puck reminds the audience that they may simply have been sleeping, and deep in dream, while the play unfolded within them. There is something of the mood of *The Tempest*, in this dream, set as it is in imaginary space, and trying out type characters, as though to unfold a genome of the human person. Of course, in a dream created by the comedian in Shakespeare, there are many intercrossing levels and doors opening onto passages, and the dream continues to embroider itself until the master plot is wrapped up, as, on blissful occasions, our own dreams are wrapped up, and we have a unit of experience behind us

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Theseus

**Character** Theseus, the Duke of Athens, is both a figure hoarily drawn from mediaeval romance, and a pretty down to earth leader of the ceremonies which will culminate in his own marriage. As we have seen, he is friendly, a good judge of character, a somewhat lusty old chap who has been around, and a very subtle connoisseur of the art of poetry and the powers of imagination. We feel one with his marriage and are fascinated by the breadth of his understanding.

**Parallels** Nestor, in Homer's *Odyssey*, is 'the wise older man type,' wondering before us whether he might have passed his prime, and happy to occupy the talkative center of every occasion. Priam, in the *Iliad*, plays a bit the Nestor role, taking the long view of things—like Theseus. In another register, one sees something of Shakespeare's Falstaff in Theseus, the lover of life, the hedonist, and for all that the giver of good advice. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* takes us into the mind of a seasoned life-traveler, like Theseus, who is going out with his eyes wide open.

### Illustrative moments

**Merry.** 'Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,' orders Theseus to Philostrate, the master of revels for his upcoming marriage to Hippolyta. It is not enough for Theseus, that he is heading into another longed for marriage, but he will have good company in good spirits to join him.

**Counselor.** Theseus, though caught up in his own marriage excitement, willingly takes time to advise both Hermia and Demetrius—who loves Hermia but unrequitedly—on their own difficult decisions. As counsellor, Theseus presents to Hermia particularly telling reasons why she should not, at that present not, defy her father and accept the resultant penalties.

**Reconciler.** Long before the final reconciliation of all the couples, by marriage, Theseus is disciplined in his calming down of his guest, Egeus, who had come into the play raging against his daughter, Hermia, but who has learned to play it cooler, and to trust Theseus' assurances that all will work out.

**M.C.** It is Theseus who is responsible for choosing the entertainment which will fill up, 'abridge,' the time remaining between the company's festive dinner and bedtime, the much longed for bed time. Having

considered the performances on offer, Theseus wisely chooses 'Pyramus and Thisbe' for the group's entertainment:

'For never anything can be amiss  
When simpleness and duty tender it.'

### Discussion questions

Is Shakespeare making a point, about the nature of human existence, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Can his point be what Puck's point is, 'what fools these mortals be'? If mortals weren't fools why would they turn love, the agency by which we are drawn to each other, into a prime occasion for conflict, as among 'the lovers' In this play, Oberon and Titania, or the fairies?

Does the present play seem to you a comedy, in the sense, say of *As You Like it*, or of *Much Ado About Nothing*? Is it a feel good play? Or is it a metaphysical play, about the nature of reality? You might want to look at *Le Temps est un songe, Time is a Dream*, by the nineteenth century French dramatist, Lenormand, for a kind of dream play which captures the Asian sense of the transitory unreality of life.

Is there an evil dimension to the workings of a sprite like Puck? Is he at all like Mephistopheles, in Goethe's *Faust*, the upside downer who fucks everything up, and who is built into the structure of reality? If there is a screw up dimension to Puck, how does that element play into the course of events in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Doesn't our present play center around loves that don't quite jibe, marriages that promote conflict, fairies that fall in love with ass heads, and lovers that fall for the wrong person?