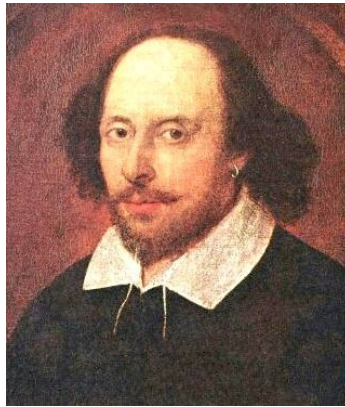


A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

by William Shakespeare



THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was written in the mid-1590's, at about the same time as *Romeo and Juliet*, to which the mechanicals' skit in Act V bears such a close resemblance. It is, in my opinion, the funniest of all of Shakespeare's plays, and shows on many levels that "the course of true love never did run smooth." The script is full of slapstick comedy and parallel events, with the stories of Theseus and Hippolyta, the young lovers, the fairies, and the mechanicals duplicating one another and intersecting with one another in a dizzying entertainment and chaos of confused identities and relationships. It has often been used as a vehicle for social commentary, but to do so ruins the fun. And that is what the play is - pure fun, able to be enjoyed by children and adults alike. Unlike most of Shakespeare's other plays, the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to be

completely original, though some of the characters, such as Theseus, Titania, Puck, Oberon, and Titania are borrowed from various mythologies.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Theseus - Duke of Athens who at the beginning of the play is preparing for his marriage to Hippolyta.
- Hippolyta - Queen of the Amazons, conquered by Theseus and now to wed him.
- Philostrate - Master of the Revels, he chooses the mechanicals to do their skit at the wedding reception of Theseus and Hippolyta.
- Egeus - Father of Hermia, insistent that she marry Demetrius or die for refusing.
- Hermia - Espoused to Demetrius by her father Egeus, but in love with Lysander; they wed at the end.
- Lysander - In love with Hermia, but rejected by her father.
- Demetrius - In love with Hermia but scorned by her; loved by Helena, whom he scorns, but marries in the end.
- Helena - Hermia's best friend, full of unrequited love for Demetrius.
- Oberon - King of the Fairies, he and his queen are feuding over a changeling boy he wants from her.
- Titania - Queen of the Fairies, she is victimized by the magic juice applied by Oberon so that she falls in love with the transformed Bottom.
- Puck - Oberon's attendant, a mischievous sprite whose blunders cause all the confusion of the central part of the play.
- Peter Quince - The leader of the mechanicals and organizer of their skit.
- Nick Bottom - A weaver, and a bombastic fool who thinks he is world's greatest actor; he is transformed by the addition of an ass's head, after which titania falls in love with him; he plays Pyramus in the skit.
- Francis Flute - A bellows-mender who plays Thisbe in the skit.
- Tom Snout - A tinker who plays Wall in the skit.
- Snug - A joiner who plays Lion in the skit.

- Robin Starveling - A tailor who plays Moonshine in the skit.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“The course of true love never did run smooth.” (Lysander, Ii, 134)

“That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
 Flying between the cold moon and the earth
 Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
 At a fair vestal throned by the west,
 And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
 As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
 But I might see young Cupid’s fiery shaft
 Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat’ry moon,
 And the imperial vot’ress passed on,
 In maiden meditation, fancy-free.” (Oberon, Ili, 155,164)
 [an oblique reference to Queen Elizabeth I]

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (Puck, IIIii, 115)

“The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact.
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
 That is the madman. The love, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.
 The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And 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.
 Such tricks hath strong imagination
 That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
 Or in the night, imagining some fear,
 How easy is a bush supposed a bear!” (Theseus, Vi, 7-22)

“If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended,
 that you have but slumbered here
 While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,
 Gentles, do not reprehend.
 If you pardon, we will mend.
 And, as I am an honest Puck,

If we have unearned luck
Now to scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends." (Puck, Vi, 418-433)

NOTES

Act I, scene 1 - The play opens with Theseus and Hippolyta discussing their upcoming wedding, four days hence. They are interrupted by Egeus, who drags his daughter Hermia into court along with two young men, Demetrius and Lysander. His complaint is that Hermia refuses to obey his wishes and marry Demetrius because she wants to marry Lysander instead. Theseus warns Hermia that she must obey her father; if not, she must either enter a convent or suffer death. She insists she will choose celibacy rather than marry Demetrius. Theseus gives her until his wedding day to think it over. After the others leave, Lysander and Hermia bewail their situation, then plot to run away together. They agree to meet in the woods outside Athens the following night. Helena then arrives on the scene, complaining of her unrequited love for Demetrius. Hermia shares their plans with Helena, telling her that their departure will leave Demetrius to her. Helena, still sulking, decides to win Demetrius' favor by telling him of Hermia and Lysander's plans, then following him into the woods simply to be near her beloved.

Act I, scene 2 - The mechanicals, a group of simple laborers, are preparing a play to be presented at Theseus' wedding feast. They have decided to perform *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and in this scene they are assigning parts. Bottom, a boisterous weaver, wants to play all the parts because he can play them better than anyone else. They plan to meet the following night in the woods outside town to practice.

Act II, scene 1 - After a brief conversation between Puck and a fairy, Oberon and Titania appear and continue their ongoing quarrel over a changeling boy that Titania has and Oberon wants. They have come for the upcoming royal wedding, Titania to bless Theseus and Oberon to bless Hippolyta. It is their intention to remain in the wood until after the wedding. After Titania and her entourage angrily depart, Oberon tells Puck to fetch a flower called "love-in-idleness," the juice of which will make the recipient fall madly in love with the first thing it sees after it awakes. He intends to use it on Titania to torment her. Demetrius and Helena then arrive, she clinging to him and he trying to get rid of her. Demetrius threatens her with bodily harm if she continues to follow him, throws her to the ground, and runs off, but she continues to pursue him doggedly. Puck then returns with the flower; Oberon takes some to use on Titania, while instructing Puck to find the Athenian youth he has just seen and apply it to his eyes so that he will fall in love with his spurned mistress.

Act II, scene 2 - Titania and her fairies arrive, and she beds down to sleep. After she goes to sleep, Oberon squeezes the juice of the flower in her eyes. Lysander and Hermia then arrive on the scene -

they are lost in the woods, it is late, and they decide to sleep and continue in the morning. Hermia insists that Lysander not lie too close to her for modesty's sake. Puck then arrives, and mistakes Lysander and Hermia for Demetrius and Helena, and applies the juice to Lysander's eyes. Helena and Demetrius then stumble in, dead tired; Demetrius runs away from her, but she can pursue him no longer. She then spots Lysander on the ground and wakes him up. Because of the flower juice, he immediately falls madly in love with her. She thinks he is mocking her and runs off, with him in hot pursuit. Hermia soon wakes up and finds herself alone in the woods, wondering where her beloved Lysander has gone.

Act III, scene 1 - The mechanicals arrive in the woods for their rehearsal. After considerable foolishness, Puck arrives on the scene and decides to play some mischief. When Bottom goes offstage briefly, he magically affixes a donkey's head on him. When the rest of the mechanicals see him, they flee in terror. He, not knowing he has been transformed, wonders what is going on, but builds up his courage by singing. His singing wakes up Titania, who immediately falls in love with him and orders her fairies to lead him to her bower.

Act III, scene 2 - Puck reports to Oberon about what is happened, and he responds that this is better than he could have imagined. Demetrius and Hermia then wander on; he has finally found her, but she is looking for Lysander, and accuses Demetrius of having murdered him. She flees, and he, too tired to go on, lies down to sleep. Oberon chastises Puck for putting the juice in the eyes of the wrong lover and making things worse instead of better. He tells Puck to go find Helena and lead her to Demetrius while he charms Demetrius' eyes so he will fall in love with Helena when he awakes. Helena and Lysander then arrive, he pursuing her and she scorning him. Their quarrel awakens Demetrius, who falls madly in love with Helena - now both men love Helena and neither loves Hermia. Helena is convinced that they are both mocking her, while they are on the verge of blows, ready to fight for her love. Hermia then arrives and runs to Lysander, who pushes her away, affirming that he hates her and loves Helena. Helena is now convinced that all three of them have entered into a conspiracy against her. The two men try to embrace Helena while she tries to fight them off; meanwhile, Hermia tries to grasp Lysander, who repeatedly pushes her aside. Soon Helena and Hermia are ready to fight, with the latter accusing the former of stealing her love's heart from her. The men try to separate them, but they finally grapple, after which Helena runs away. Meanwhile, the men go off together to seek a place for a duel. Oberon tells Puck to keep them apart, then gives him an herb which is the antidote to the flower juice, telling him to put it into Lysander's eye when he falls asleep. Oberon then leaves to find Titania, intending to get the changeling from her, then give her the antidote and restore their relationship. After considerable running around in the woods, all four lovers wind up in the same general area and fall asleep, after which Puck puts the antidote into Lysander's eyes.

Act IV, scene 1 - The scene begins at Titania's bower, where she is ready to bed down with the transformed Bottom. After she falls asleep, Oberon puts the antidote in her eyes, and when she awakes, she speaks of having had a bizarre dream. They make up and dance with the other fairies, while Puck removes the ass's head from Bottom. They leave, and Theseus and Hippolyta and their entourage arrive, having come to the woods to do some hunting. They find the young lovers asleep

together and waken them. They, of course, are totally confused, but know now that Hermia and Lysander are in love with one another, as are Helena and Demetrius. Theseus approves of the new developments, overrules the angry Egeus, and announces that both couples will be married in a triple ceremony with himself and Hippolyta. They all depart for Athens, the lovers still clueless as to what had happened to them. After all leave, Bottom wakes up and speaks of an amazing dream he has had; he is determined to turn it into a dramatic performance.

Act IV, scene 2 - Back in Athens, the mechanicals are mourning Bottom, whom they are convinced has been bewitched. He then arrives, all rejoice, and they quickly go to prepare their play, which has been chosen as one of the possible entertainments for the wedding reception.

Act V, scene 1 - The final scene occurs at the wedding feast for the three couples. They begin by discussing the strange events of the previous few days. Then Theseus calls for the Master of the Revels, who gives them a list of entertainments that have been prepared for the evening. After rejecting several of them, they choose to see the mechanicals' presentation of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Philostrate warns them that it is truly horrible, but they want to see it anyway, expecting to take some pleasure at the expense of the actors. The mechanicals then enter, and thoroughly botch their play, much to the amusement of the lovers and the audience (a dream for directors and actors alike, this skit provides all kinds of opportunities to "ham it up"), and is the funniest scene in all of Shakespeare. The mechanicals take their bows and the lovers go off to bed. Puck then enters, and along with Titania and Oberon blesses the newlyweds. Puck closes with the final epilogue, and disclaimer apologizing for any offenses and begging for the audience's approval and applause.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the playwright has much to say about plays and acting, often criticizing the popular acting techniques of his own day. Discuss these critiques, explaining what Shakespeare views as essential to good acting and good theater. Does *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself fit these criteria? Why or why not?
2. Analyze the relationships among the four couples (including Oberon and Titania) in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Would you describe any of these relationships as portraying true love? Why or why not? Be sure to use specifics from the play in developing your answer.
3. Discuss the role of the flower juice in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What is Shakespeare saying about the nature of love by using this plot device? Is he right in his assertion? Why or why not?

4. In the performance of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the roles of Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania are often doubled. Such casting leads to certain comparisons in the minds of the audience. Compare and contrast the relationships of the Duke of Athens and his warrior queen and the King and Queen of the Fairies. In what ways are their relationships similar? In what ways are they different?
5. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is love truly blind? To what extent do any of the lovers really know their counterparts? On what basis do they give love to one another? How common is this approach to love today? Is it wise or foolish? Why? Be sure to use specifics from the play to support your answer.
6. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the major theme of the play is enunciated by Lysander when he says, "The course of true love never did run smooth." Is this a universal truth, or is it only true when love is as shallow and foolish as it is pictured as being in this story? To what extent may lessons about the reality of love be drawn from the play, and to what extent is it intended merely to mock the foolish behavior that too often is associated with the word "love"? Use specifics from the play to support your conclusions.
7. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the title of the play speaks of a theme often sounded by its characters - that of dreaming, or illusion. How important is this theme to the ideas communicated in the play? to the audience's perception of and enjoyment of the play? Be specific, citing details from the script to support your arguments.
8. Discuss the different ways in which William Shakespeare uses contrasts to enhance the audience's enjoyment of the story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In what ways is the humor based on key contrasts among characters and situations? Why are these contrasts so funny? Cite specific examples in building your arguments.
9. Discuss the role of the love potion in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What is the magic juice of the flower intended to communicate about the nature of love? Are these ideas accurate? To what extent? Have you ever experienced in your own life feelings that made you think you had been hit with this fairy juice? Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
10. Analyze the mechanicals' skit in Act V of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How does this skit satirize the events of the central portion of the play? How does it encourage us to look at these events, and at the idea of love as a whole? Be sure to use specifics in building your comparisons.
11. William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* were written at about the same time. Some think that Shakespeare was satirizing his own popular theatrical endeavor when he wrote the mechanicals' sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Compare and contrast the two. To what extent can the mechanicals' skit be seen as a parody of Shakespeare's first tragedy?

12. Compare and contrast the views of love found in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Consider the views of love held by the characters as well as the incidents that help communicate the leading thematic elements of the plays. Does the fact that one is a tragedy and the other a comedy affect the views of love presented in them? Why or why not?
13. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was written about a year after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Discuss the similarities between the two plays. Consider themes, language, imagery, characters, and plot devices. To what extent is the Mechanicals' skit in the earlier play a parody of the main story of the tragedy?
14. Why is it necessary for the characters to appear to take themselves completely seriously in order for the comedy in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to work? Too often, actors deliberately overdo their roles in order to get a few more laughs. Why is this practice detrimental to the impact of the performance? Be sure to consider the concepts of "the willing suspension of disbelief" and "catharsis" in your answer.
15. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both Puck and Bottom are comic figures, but their roles are very different, as are their styles of comedy. Compare and contrast the two. If you were to choose one as the protagonist of the play, which one would it be? Why? Support your answer with details from the play.
16. Discuss the characters of the young lovers in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Do you think they emerge with distinct personalities, or are they essentially indistinguishable? If they are different, what is the significance of their differences? If they are the same, why do you think Shakespeare chose to shape the characters in this way?
17. Discuss the importance of the forest in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How does the setting in which most of the action takes place contribute to the plot and its various themes? Be sure to cite specifics from the play to support your discussion.
18. Compare and contrast the courses of the love between Silvius and Phebe in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and that between Helena and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Be sure to consider the relationships between the wooer and the wooed, the language used to express their quarrels, and the ways in which the playwright resolves the relationships.
19. Compare and contrast the roles played by the forest in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Though the two settings are transformative in different ways, both play significant roles in changing those who enter their precincts. Relate these changes and the ways in which they occur to the central themes of the two comedies.

20. Discuss the use of the ideas of illusion and reality in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. To what extent does the inability to distinguish between illusion and reality provide the basis for the comic impact of the play? Compare this to the more-developed treatment of the same idea in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
21. Compare and contrast the use of slapstick comedy in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Which slapstick scenes do you consider more effective? Why? Be sure to support your answer with quotations from both plays.
22. Compare and contrast the pairs of young couples in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Which set of couples is the more credible? Which author constructs the more effective satire of romantic love? Are the answers to the two questions related? Why or why not?
23. In many of William Shakespeare's comedies, the forest is symbolic of the breaking down of society's values. Compare and contrast the way this theme is handled in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
24. Both Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focus on young lovers whose romance is hindered because their parents have other plans. Compare and contrast the ways in which the two playwrights resolve this parent/child conflict. Be sure to consider elements of both plot and character along with the use of comedy to produce a satisfactory denouement.
25. Compare and contrast the performance of *The Nine Worthies* in William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* to the mechanicals' sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Evaluate them for humor, satire, and relationship to the plot and the characters. Which do you enjoy more, and why?
26. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that, in the end, all people are fools. The concept of the universality of folly is also expounded by William Shakespeare in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To what extent may Shakespeare's comic masterpiece be viewed as an exposition of Erasmus' description of human experience? Draw connections between the two works as you develop your arguments.
27. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the mischievous fairy Puck, after observing the antics of the young lovers, opines, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" The irrationality of love is a subject frequently addressed in comedies. Compare and contrast the treatment of this subject in Shakespeare's classic farce and Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. Give special attention both to how the irrationality of love is portrayed and how the stories end.

28. Critics have compared certain aspects of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In both stories, young people freed from parental authority find themselves in sexually-charged adventures, in one case in the woods outside the Sotherton estate and in the other in the enchanted forest outside Athens. Both works also contain a "play within the play" that satirizes in extreme form the conflicts among the young lovers. In your opinion, is the comparison a valid one? Why or why not? Support your arguments with details from both works of literature.