

## II MA ENGLISH

### SHAKESPEARE STUDIES – MEN31

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#### UNIT I

## A Midsummer Night's Dream

William Shakespeare

Theseus, duke of Athens, is preparing for his marriage to Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, with a four-day festival of pomp and entertainment. He commissions his Master of the Revels, Philostrate, to find suitable amusements for the occasion. Egeus, an Athenian nobleman, marches into Theseus's court with his daughter, Hermia, and two young men, Demetrius and Lysander. Egeus wishes Hermia to marry Demetrius (who loves Hermia), but Hermia is in love with Lysander and refuses to comply. Egeus asks for the full penalty of law to fall on Hermia's head if she flouts her father's will. Theseus gives Hermia until his wedding to consider her options, warning her that disobeying her father's wishes could result in her being sent to a convent or even executed. Nonetheless, Hermia and Lysander plan to escape Athens the following night and marry in the house of Lysander's aunt, some seven leagues distant from the city. They make their intentions known to Hermia's friend Helena, who was once engaged to Demetrius and still loves him even though he jilted her after meeting Hermia. Hoping to regain his love, Helena tells Demetrius of the elopement that Hermia and Lysander have planned. At the appointed time, Demetrius stalks into the woods after his intended bride and her lover; Helena follows behind him.

In these same woods are two very different groups of characters. The first is a band of fairies, including Oberon, the fairy king, and Titania, his queen, who has recently returned from India to bless the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. The second is a band of Athenian craftsmen rehearsing a play that they hope to perform for the duke and his bride. Oberon and Titania are at odds over a young Indian prince given to Titania by the prince's mother; the boy is so beautiful that Oberon wishes to make him a knight, but Titania refuses. Seeking revenge, Oberon sends his merry servant, Puck, to acquire a magical flower, the juice of which can be spread over a sleeping person's eyelids to make that person fall in love with the first thing he or she sees upon waking. Puck obtains the flower, and Oberon tells him of his plan to spread its juice on the sleeping Titania's eyelids. Having seen Demetrius act cruelly toward Helena, he orders Puck to spread some of the juice on the eyelids of the young Athenian man. Puck encounters Lysander and Hermia; thinking that Lysander is the Athenian of whom Oberon spoke, Puck afflicts him with the love potion. Lysander happens to see Helena upon awaking and falls deeply in love with her, abandoning Hermia. As the night progresses and Puck attempts to undo his mistake, both Lysander and Demetrius end up in love with Helena, who believes that they are mocking her. Hermia becomes so jealous that she tries to challenge Helena to a fight. Demetrius and Lysander

nearly do fight over Helena's love, but Puck confuses them by mimicking their voices, leading them apart until they are lost separately in the forest.

When Titania wakes, the first creature she sees is Bottom, the most ridiculous of the Athenian craftsmen, whose head Puck has mockingly transformed into that of an ass. Titania passes a ludicrous interlude doting on the ass-headed weaver. Eventually, Oberon obtains the Indian boy, Puck spreads the love potion on Lysander's eyelids, and by morning all is well. Theseus and Hippolyta discover the sleeping lovers in the forest and take them back to Athens to be married—Demetrius now loves Helena, and Lysander now loves Hermia. After the group wedding, the lovers watch Bottom and his fellow craftsmen perform their play, a fumbling, hilarious version of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. When the play is completed, the lovers go to bed; the fairies briefly emerge to bless the sleeping couples with a protective charm and then disappear. Only Puck remains, to ask the audience for its forgiveness and approval and to urge it to remember the play as though it had all been a dream.

## **Act I, scene i**

At his palace, Theseus, duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, his fiancée, discuss their wedding, to be held in four days, under the new moon. Impatient for the event and in a celebratory mood, Theseus orders Philostrate, his Master of the Revels, to “stir up the Athenian youth to merriments” and devise entertainments with which the couple might pass the time until their wedding (I.i.12). Philostrate takes his leave, and Theseus promises Hippolyta that though he wooed her with his sword (Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, presumably met Theseus in combat), he will wed her “with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling”—with a grand celebration to begin at once and last until the wedding (I.i.19).

Egeus, a citizen of Athens, strides into the room, followed by his daughter Hermia and the Athenian youths Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus has come to see Theseus with a complaint against his daughter: although Egeus has promised her in marriage to Demetrius, who loves her, Lysander has won Hermia's heart, and Hermia refuses to obey her father and marry Demetrius. Egeus demands that the law punish Hermia if she fails to comply with his demands. Theseus speaks to Hermia sharply, telling her to expect to be sent to a nunnery or put to death. Lysander interrupts, accusing Demetrius of being fickle in love, saying that he was once engaged to Hermia's friend Helena but abandoned her after he met Hermia. Theseus admits that he has heard this story, and he takes Egeus and Demetrius aside to discuss it. Before they go, he orders Hermia to take the time remaining before his marriage to Hippolyta to make up her mind. Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and Demetrius depart, leaving Hermia alone with Lysander.

Hermia and Lysander discuss the trials that must be faced by those who are in love: “The course of true love never did run smooth,” Lysander says (I.i.134). He proposes a plan: he has an aunt, wealthy and childless, who lives seven leagues from Athens and who dotes on Lysander like a son. At her house, Hermia and Lysander can be married—and, because the manor is outside of Athens, they would be free from Athenian law. Hermia is overjoyed, and they agree to travel to the house the following night.

Helena, Hermia's friend whom Demetrius jilted, enters the room, lovesick and deeply melancholy because Demetrius no longer loves her. Hermia and Lysander confide their plan to her and wish her luck with Demetrius. They depart to prepare for the following night's journey. Helena remarks to herself that she envies them their happiness. She thinks up a plan: if she tells Demetrius of the elopement that Lysander and Hermia are planning, he will be bound to follow them to the woods to try to stop them; if she then follows him into the woods, she might have a chance to win back his love.

## **Analysis**

From the outset, Shakespeare subtly portrays the lovers as a group out of balance, a motif that creates tension throughout the play. For the sake of symmetry, the audience wants the four lovers to form two couples; instead, both men love Hermia, leaving Helena out of the equation. The women are thus in nonparallel situations, adding to the sense of structural imbalance. By establishing the fact that Demetrius once loved Helena, Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a harmonious resolution to this love tangle: if Demetrius could only be made to love Helena again, then all would be well. By the end of the play, the fairies' intervention effects just such an outcome, and all does become well, though it is worth noting that the restoration of Demetrius's love for Helena is the result of magic rather than a natural reawakening of his feelings.

The genre of comedy surrounding the Athenian lovers is farce, in which the humor stems from exaggerated characters trying to find their way out of ludicrous situations. Shakespeare portrays the lovers as overly serious, as each is deeply and earnestly preoccupied with his or her own feelings: Helena is anxious about her looks, reacting awkwardly when Lysander calls her "fair"; Hermia later becomes self-conscious about her short stature; Demetrius is willing to see Hermia executed to prevent her from marrying another man; and Lysander seems to have cast himself as the hero of a great love story in his own mind (III.ii.188, III.ii.247). Hermia is stubborn and quarrelsome, while Helena lacks self-confidence and believes that other people mock her. The airy world of the fairies and the absurd predicaments in which the lovers find themselves once in the forest make light of the lovers' grave concerns.

## **Act I, scene ii**

In another part of Athens, far from Theseus's palace, a group of common laborers meets at the house of Peter Quince to rehearse a play that the men hope to perform for the grand celebration preceding the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Quince, a carpenter, tries to conduct the meeting, but the talkative weaver Nick Bottom continually interrupts him with advice and direction. Quince tells the group what play they are to perform: *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which tells the story of two lovers, separated by their parents' feud, who speak to each other at night through a hole in a wall. In the play, a lion surprises Thisbe one night and tatters her mantle before she escapes. When Pyramus finds the shredded garment, he assumes that the lion has killed Thisbe; stricken with grief, he commits

suicide. When Thisbe finds Pyramus's bloody corpse, she too commits suicide. Quince assigns their parts: Bottom is to play Pyramus; Francis Flute, Thisbe; Robin Starveling, Thisbe's mother; Tom Snout, Pyramus's father; Quince himself, Thisbe's father; and Snug, the lion.

As Quince doles out the parts, Bottom often interrupts, announcing that he should be the one to play the assigned part. He says that his ability to speak in a woman's voice would make him a wonderful Thisbe and that his ability to roar would make him a wonderful lion. Quince eventually convinces him that Pyramus is the part for him, by virtue of the fact that Pyramus is supposed to be very handsome. Snug worries that he will be unable to learn the lion's part, but Quince reassures him that it will be very easy to learn, since the lion speaks no words and only growls and roars. This worries the craftsmen, who reason that if the lion frightens any of the noble ladies in the audience, they will all be executed; since they are only common laborers, they do not want to risk upsetting powerful people. Bottom says that he could roar as sweetly as a nightingale so as not to frighten anyone, but Quince again convinces him that he can only play Pyramus. The group disperses, agreeing to meet in the woods the following night to rehearse their play.

## Analysis

The most important motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and one of the most important literary techniques Shakespeare uses throughout the play, is that of contrast. The three main groups of characters are all vastly different from one another, and the styles, moods, and structures of their respective subplots also differ. It is by incorporating these contrasting realms into a single story that Shakespeare creates the play's dreamlike atmosphere. Almost diametrically opposite the beautiful, serious, and love-struck young nobles are the clumsy, ridiculous, and deeply confused craftsmen, around whom many of the play's most comical scenes are centered.

Where the young lovers are graceful and well spoken—almost comically well suited to their roles as melodramatically passionate youths—the craftsmen often fumble their words and could not be less well suited for acting. This disjunction reveals itself as it becomes readily apparent that the craftsmen have no idea how to put on a dramatic production: their speeches are full of impossible ideas and mistakes (Bottom, for example, claims that he will roar “as gently / as any sucking dove”); their concerns about their parts are absurd (Flute does not want to play Thisbe because he is growing a beard); and their extended discussion about whether they will be executed if the lion's roaring frightens the ladies further evidences the fact that their primary concern is with themselves, not their art (II.i.67–68).

The fact that the workmen have chosen to perform the Pyramus and Thisbe story, a Babylonian myth familiar to Shakespeare's audiences from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, only heightens the comedy. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is highly dramatic, with suicides and tragically wasted love (themes that Shakespeare takes up in *Romeo and Juliet* as well). Badly suited to their task and inexperienced, although endlessly well meaning, the craftsmen are sympathetic figures even when the audience laughs at them—a fact made explicit in Act V, when Theseus makes fun of their play even as he honors their effort. The contrast between the serious nature of the play and the bumbling foolishness of the craftsmen makes the endeavor all the more ridiculous. Further,

the actors' botched telling of the youthful love between Pyramus and Thisbe implicitly mocks the melodramatic love tangle of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander.

## **Act II, scene i**

In the forest, two fairies, one a servant of Titania, the other a servant of Oberon, meet by chance in a glade. Oberon's servant tells Titania's to be sure to keep Titania out of Oberon's sight, for the two are very angry with each other. Titania, he says, has taken a little Indian prince as her attendant, and the boy is so beautiful that Oberon wishes to make him his knight. Titania, however, refuses to give the boy up.

Titania's servant is delighted to recognize Oberon's servant as Robin Goodfellow, better known as Puck, a mischievous sprite notorious for his pranks and jests. Puck admits his identity and describes some of the tricks he plays on mortals.

The two are interrupted when Oberon enters from one side of the glade, followed by a train of attendants. At the same moment, Titania enters from the other side of the glade, followed by her own train. The two fairy royals confront one another, each questioning the other's motive for coming so near to Athens just before the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. Titania accuses Oberon of loving Hippolyta and of thus wishing to bless the marriage; Oberon accuses Titania of loving Theseus. The conversation turns to the little Indian boy, whom Oberon asks Titania to give him. But Titania responds that the boy's mother was a devotee of hers before she died; in honor of his mother's memory, Titania will hold the boy near to her. She invites Oberon to go with her to dance in a fairy round and see her nightly revels, but Oberon declines, saying that they will be at odds until she gives him the boy.

Titania storms away, and Oberon vows to take revenge on her before the night is out. He sends Puck to seek a white-and-purple flower called love-in-idleness, which was once hit with one of Cupid's arrows. He says that the flower's juice, if rubbed on a sleeper's eyelids, will cause the sleeper to fall in love with the first living thing he or she sees upon waking. Oberon announces that he will use this juice on Titania, hoping that she will fall in love with some ridiculous creature; he will then refuse to lift the juice's effect until she yields the Indian prince to him.

## **Analysis**

Act II serves two main functions: it introduces the fairies and their realm, and it initiates the romantic confusion that will eventually help restore the balance of love. The fairies, whom Shakespeare bases heavily on characters familiar from English folklore, are among the most memorable and delightful characters in the play. They speak in lilting rhymes infused with gorgeous poetic imagery. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play dominated by the presence of doubles, and the fairies are designed to contrast heavily with the young lovers and the craftsmen. Whereas the lovers are earnest and serious, Puck and the other pixies are merry and full of laughter; whereas the craftsmen are bumbling, earthy, and engage in methodical labor, the fairies are delicate, airy, and indulge in effortless magic and enchantment.

The conflict between Oberon and Titania imports into the fairy realm the motif of love being out of balance. As with the Athenian lovers, the eventual resolution of the tension between the two

occurs only by means of magic. Though the craftsmen do not experience romantic confusion about one another, Bottom becomes involved in an accidental romance with Titania in Act III, and in Act V two craftsmen portray the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, who commit suicide after misinterpreting events.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was probably performed before Queen Elizabeth, and Shakespeare managed to make a flattering reference to his monarch in Act II, scene i. When Oberon introduces the idea of the love potion to Puck, he says that he once saw Cupid fire an arrow that missed its mark:

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 thronèd 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 passèd on,  
In maiden meditation, fancy-free  
(II.i.155–164).

Queen Elizabeth never married and was celebrated in her time as a woman of chastity, a virgin queen whose concerns were above the flesh. Here Shakespeare alludes to that reputation by describing Cupid firing an arrow "at a fair vestal thronèd by the west"—Queen Elizabeth—whom the heat of passion cannot affect because the arrow is cooled "in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon." Shakespeare celebrates how Elizabeth put affairs of state before her personal life and lived "in maiden meditation, fancy-free." He nestles a patriotic aside in an evocative description, couching praise for the ruler on whose good favor he depended in dexterous poetic language. (Audiences in Shakespeare's day would most likely have recognized this imaginative passage's reference to their monarch.)

Because many of the main themes and motifs in A Midsummer Night's Dream are very light, even secondary to the overall sense of comedy and the dreamlike atmosphere, it is perhaps more important to try to understand not what the play means but rather how Shakespeare creates its mood. One technique that he uses is to embellish action with a wealth of finely wrought poetic imagery, using language to work upon the imagination of the audience and thereby effect a kind of magic upon the stage: "I must go seek some dewdrops here," one fairy says, "And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" (II.i.14–15). The fairies conjure many of the play's most evocative images: Oberon, for instance, describes having heard

a mermaid on a dolphin's back  
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath  
That the rude sea grew civil at her song

And certain stars shot madly from their spheres  
To hear the sea-maid's music  
(II.i.150–154)

and seen

a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.  
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,  
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight  
(II.i.249–254).

This technique extends even to the suggestive names of some of the characters, such as the craftsmen Snug, Starveling, Quince, Flute, and Snout, and the fairies Cobweb, Mustardseed, Mote, and Peaseblossom.

## **Act II, scene ii**

As Puck flies off to seek the flower, Demetrius and Helena pass through the glade. Oberon makes himself invisible so that he can watch and hear them. Demetrius harangues Helena, saying that he does not love her, does not want to see her, and wishes that she would stop following him immediately. He curses Lysander and Hermia, whom he is pursuing, hoping to prevent their marriage and slay Lysander. Helena repeatedly declares her adoration for, and loyalty to, Demetrius, who repeatedly insults her. They exit the grove, with Helena following closely behind Demetrius, and Oberon materializes. He declares that before the night is out, Demetrius will be the one chasing Helena.

Puck appears, carrying the flower whose juice will serve as the love potion. Oberon takes the flower and says that he knows of a fragrant stream bank surrounded with flowers where Titania often sleeps. Before hurrying away to anoint Titania's eyelids with the flower's juice, Oberon orders Puck to look for an Athenian youth being pursued by a lady and to put some of the juice on the disdainful youth's eyelids, so that when he wakes he will fall in love with the lady. He informs Puck that he will know the youth by his Athenian garb. Puck agrees to carry out his master's wishes.

After her dancing and revelry, Titania falls asleep by the stream bank. Oberon creeps up on her and squeezes the flower's juice onto her eyelids, chanting a spell, so that Titania will fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. Oberon departs, and Lysander and Hermia wander into the glade. Lysander admits that he has forgotten the way to his aunt's house and says that they should sleep in the forest until morning, when they can find their way by daylight. Lysander wishes to sleep close to Hermia, but she insists that they sleep apart, to respect custom and propriety. At some distance from each other, they fall asleep.

Puck enters, complaining that he has looked everywhere but cannot find an Athenian youth and pursuing lady. He is relieved when he finally happens upon the sleeping forms of Lysander and Hermia, assuming that they are the Athenians of whom Oberon spoke. Noticing that the two are sleeping apart, Puck surmises that the youth refused to let Hermia come closer to him. Calling him a “churl,” Puck spreads the potion on Lysander’s eyelids, and he departs.

Simultaneously, Helena pursues Demetrius through the glade. He insults her again and insists that she no longer follow him. She complains that she is afraid of the dark, but he nonetheless storms off without her. Saying that she is out of breath, Helena remains behind, bemoaning her unrequited love. She sees the sleeping Lysander and wakes him up. The potion takes effect, and Lysander falls deeply in love with Helena. He begins to praise her beauty and to declare his undying passion for her. Disbelieving, Helena reminds him that he loves Hermia; he declares that Hermia is nothing to him. Helena believes that Lysander is making fun of her, and she grows angry. She leaves in a huff, and Lysander follows after her. Hermia soon wakes and is shocked to find that Lysander is gone. She stumbles into the woods to find him.

## **Analysis**

Act II, scene ii introduces the plot device of the love potion, which Shakespeare uses to explore the comic possibilities inherent in the motif of love out of balance. Oberon’s meddling in the affairs of humans further disrupts the love equilibrium, and the love potion symbolizes the fact that the lovers themselves will not reason out their dilemmas; rather, an outside force—magic—will resolve the love tangle.

The ease with which characters’ affections change in the play, so that Lysander is madly in love with Hermia at one point and with Helena at another, has troubled some readers, who feel that Shakespeare profanes the idea of true love by treating it as inconstant and subject to outside manipulation. It is important to remember, however, that while *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* contains elements of romance, it is not a true love story like *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare’s aim is not to comment on the nature of true love but rather to mock gently the melodramatic afflictions and confusions that love induces. Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander are meant not to be romantic archetypes but rather sympathetic figures thrown into the confusing circumstances of a romantic farce.

Like much farce, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* relies heavily on misunderstanding and mistaken identity to create its humorous entanglements. Oberon’s unawareness of the presence of a second Athenian couple—Lysander and Hermia—in the forest enables Puck’s mistaken application of the flower’s juice. This confusion underscores the crucial role of circumstance in the play: it is not people who are responsible for what happens but rather fate. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, oppositely, Shakespeare forces his characters to make crucial decisions that affect their lives.

Much of the comic tension in this scene (and throughout the rest of the play, as the confusion wrought by the love potion only increases) stems from the fact that the solution to the love tangle seems so simple to the reader/audience: if Demetrius could simply be made to love Hermia, then the lovers could pair off symmetrically, and love would be restored to a point of balance.



Shakespeare teases the audience by dangling the magic flower as a simple mechanism by which this resolution could be achieved. He uses this mechanism, however, to cycle through a number of increasingly ridiculous arrangements before he allows the love story to arrive at its inevitable happy conclusion.

## **Act III, scene i**

The craftsmen meet in the woods at the appointed time to rehearse their play. Since they will be performing in front of a large group of nobles (and since they have an exaggerated sense of the delicacy of noble ladies), Bottom declares that certain elements of the play must be changed. He fears that Pyramus's suicide and the lion's roaring will frighten the ladies and lead to the actors' executions. The other men share Bottom's concern, and they decide to write a prologue explaining that the lion is not really a lion nor the sword really a sword and assuring the ladies that no one will really die. They decide also that, to clarify the fact that the story takes place at night and that Pyramus and Thisbe are separated by a wall, one man must play the wall and another the moonlight by carrying a bush and a lantern.

As the craftsmen rehearse, Puck enters and marvels at the scene of the "hempen homespuns" trying to act (III.i.65). When Bottom steps aside, temporarily out of view of the other craftsmen, Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. When the ass-headed Bottom reenters the scene, the other men become terrified and run for their lives. Delighting in the mischief, Puck chases after them. Bottom, perplexed, remains behind.

In the same grove, the sleeping Titania wakes. When she sees Bottom, the flower juice on her eyelids works its magic, and she falls deeply and instantly in love with the ass-headed weaver. She insists that he remain with her, embraces him, and appoints a group of fairies—Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed—to see to his every wish. Bottom takes these events in stride, having no notion that his head has been replaced with that of an ass. He comments that his friends have acted like asses in leaving him, and he introduces himself to the fairies. Titania looks on him with undisguised love as he follows her to her forest bower.

## **Analysis**

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is roughly such that Act I introduces the main characters and the conflict; Act II sets up the interaction among the Athenian lovers, the fairies, and the craftsmen (the lovers wander through the forest, the fairies make mischief with the love potion); and Act III develops the comical possibilities of these interactions. As Act III is the first act in which all three groups appear, the fantastic contrasts between them are at their most visible.

The craftsmen's attempt at drama is a comedy of incongruity, as the rough, unsophisticated men demonstrate their utter inability to conceive a competent theatrical production. Their proposal to let the audience know that it is night by having a character play the role of Moonshine exemplifies their straightforward, literal manner of thinking and their lack of regard for subtlety.

In their earthy and practical natures, the craftsmen stand in stark contrast to the airy and impish fairies.

The fairies' magic is one of the main components of the dreamlike atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is integral to the plot's progression. It throws love increasingly out of balance and brings the farce into its most frenzied state. With the youths' love tangle already affected by the potion, Shakespeare creates further havoc by generating a romance across groups, as Titania falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Obviously, the delicate fairy queen is dramatically unsuited to the clumsy, monstrous craftsman. Shakespeare develops this romance with fantastic aplomb and heightens the comedy of the incongruity by making Bottom fully unaware of his transformed state. Rather, Bottom is so self-confident that he finds it fairly unremarkable that the beautiful fairy queen should wish desperately to become his lover. Further, his ironic reference to his colleagues as asses and his hunger for hay emphasize the ridiculousness of his lofty self-estimation.

### **Act III, scene ii**

In another part of the forest, Puck tells Oberon about the predicament involving Titania and Bottom. Oberon is delighted that his plan is working so well. Hermia, having discovered Demetrius after losing Lysander, enters the clearing with Demetrius. Puck is surprised to see the woman he saw earlier with a different man from the one he enchanted. Oberon is surprised to see the man he ordered Puck to enchant with a different woman. He realizes that a mistake has been made and says that he and Puck will have to remedy it. Hermia presses Demetrius about Lysander's whereabouts, fearing that he is dead, but Demetrius does not know where Lysander has gone, and he is bitter and reproachful that Hermia would rather be with Lysander than with him. Hermia grows angrier and angrier, and Demetrius decides that it is pointless to follow her. He lies down and falls asleep, and Hermia stalks away to find Lysander.

When Hermia is gone, Oberon sends Puck to find Helena and squeezes the flower juice onto Demetrius's eyelids. Puck quickly returns, saying that Helena is close behind him. Helena enters with Lysander still pledging his undying love to her. Still believing that he is mocking her, Helena remains angry and hurt. The noise of their bickering wakes Demetrius, who sees Helena and immediately falls in love with her. Demetrius joins Lysander in declaring this love. Lysander argues that Demetrius does not really love Helena; Demetrius argues that Lysander is truly in love with Hermia. Helena believes that they are both mocking her and refuses to believe that either one loves her.

Hermia reenters, having heard Lysander from a distance. When she learns that her beloved Lysander now claims to love Helena, as does Demetrius, she is appalled and incredulous. Helena, who is likewise unable to fathom that both men could be in love with her, assumes that Hermia is involved in the joke that she believes the men are playing on her, and she chides Hermia furiously for treating their friendship so lightly. Lysander and Demetrius are ready to fight one another for Helena's love; as they lunge at one another, Hermia holds Lysander back, provoking his scorn and disgust: "I will shake thee from me like a serpent" (III.ii.262). Hermia begins to suspect that Helena has somehow acted to steal Lysander's love from her, and she surmises that, because she is short and Helena is tall, Helena must have used her height to lure Lysander. She

grows furious with Helena and threatens to scratch out her eyes. Helena becomes afraid, saying that Hermia was always much quicker than she to fight. Demetrius and Lysander vow to protect Helena from Hermia, but they quickly become angry with each other and storm off into the forest to have a duel. Helena runs away from Hermia, and Hermia, reannouncing her amazement at the turn of events, departs.

Oberon dispatches Puck to prevent Lysander and Demetrius from fighting and says that they must resolve this confusion by morning. Puck flies through the forest hurling insults in the voices of both Lysander and Demetrius, confusing the would-be combatants until they are hopelessly lost.

### **Act III, scene iii**

Eventually, all four of the young Athenian lovers wander back separately into the glade and fall asleep. Puck squeezes the love potion onto Lysander's eyelids, declaring that in the morning all will be well.

#### **Analysis**

The confusion in Act III continues to heighten, as the Athenian lovers and the fairies occupy the stage simultaneously, often without seeing each other. The comedy is at its silliest, and the characters are at their most extreme: Helena and Hermia nearly come to blows as a result of their physical insecurities, and Lysander and Demetrius actually try to have a duel. The plot is at its most chaotic, and, though there is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the action is at its most intense. With the falling action of Acts IV and V, however, matters will sort themselves out quickly and order will be restored.

### **Act III, scenes ii–iii**

Like Act III, scene i, Act III, scene ii serves a mainly developmental role in the plot structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, focusing on the increasing confusion among the four Athenian lovers. Now that both men have been magically induced to switch their love from Hermia to Helena, the vanities and insecurities of both women become far more pronounced. Helena's low self-esteem prevents her from believing that either man could really be in love with her. Hermia, who is used to having both men fawn on her, has her vanity stung by the fact that they are suddenly cold and indifferent toward her. She reveals a latent insecurity about her short stature when she assumes that Helena has used her height ("her personage, her tall personage") to win Lysander's love, and her quick temper is revealed in Helena's fear that Hermia will attack her (III.ii.293). The men's exaggerated masculine aggression leads them to vow to protect Helena from the dreaded Hermia—a ridiculous state of affairs given that they are two armed men whereas Hermia is a tiny, unarmed woman. Their aggression betrays Helena, however, as the men refocus it on their competition for her love.

The potion is responsible for the confusion of the lovers' situation; thus, Shakespeare links the theme of magic to the motif of imbalanced love, which dominates the scene. Had the love potion never been brought into play, the Athenian lovers would still be tangled in their romantic mess,

but they would all understand it, whereas the fairies' meddling has left both Hermia and Helena unable to comprehend the situation. Additionally, Puck's magical ventriloquism is what prevents Lysander and Demetrius from killing each other at the end of the scene. Thus, magic both brings about their mutual hostility (to this point, Lysander has not been antagonistic toward Demetrius) and resolves it.

## **Act IV, scene i**

As the Athenian lovers lie asleep in the grove, Titania enters with Bottom, still with the head of an ass, and their fairy attendants. Titania tells Bottom to lie down with his head in her lap, so that she may twine roses into his hair and kiss his "fair large ears" (IV.i.4). Bottom orders Peaseblossom to scratch his head and sends Cobweb to find him some honey. Titania asks Bottom if he is hungry, and he replies that he has a strange appetite for hay. Titania suggests that she send a fairy to fetch him nuts from a squirrel's hoard, but Bottom says that he would rather have a handful of dried peas. Yawning, he declares that he is very tired. Titania tells him to sleep in her arms, and she sends the fairies away. Gazing at Bottom's head, she cries, "O how I love thee, how I dote on thee!" and they fall asleep (IV.i.42).

Puck and Oberon enter the glade and comment on the success of Oberon's revenge. Oberon says that he saw Titania earlier in the woods and taunted her about her love for the ass-headed Bottom; he asked her for the Indian child, promising to undo the spell if she would yield him, to which she consented. Satisfied, Oberon bends over the sleeping Titania and speaks the charm to undo the love potion. Titania wakes and is amazed to find that she is sleeping with the donkeylike Bottom. Oberon calls for music and takes his queen away to dance. She says that she hears the morning lark, and they exit. Puck speaks a charm over Bottom to restore his normal head, and he follows after his master.

As dawn breaks, Theseus, his attendants, Hippolyta, and Egeus enter to hear the baying of Theseus's hounds. They are startled to find the Athenian youths sleeping in the glade. They wake them and demand their story, which the youths are only partly able to recall—to them, the previous night seems as insubstantial as a dream. All that is clear to them is that Demetrius and Helena love each other, as do Lysander and Hermia. Theseus orders them to follow him to the temple for a great wedding feast. As they leave, Bottom wakes. He says that he has had a wondrous dream and that he will have Peter Quince write a ballad of his dream to perform at the end of their play.

## **Analysis**

Barely 300 lines long, Act IV is the shortest and most transitional of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* five acts. The first three serve respectively to introduce the characters, establish the comic situation, and develop the comedy; Act IV ends the conflict and leads to the happy ending in Act V. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is the speed with which the conflict is resolved and the farce comes to an end; despite the ubiquity of chaos in Act III, all that is necessary to resolve

matters is a bit of potion on Lysander's eyelids and Oberon's forgiveness of his wife. The climactic moment between Titania and Oberon, during which she agrees to give him the Indian boy, is not even shown onstage but is merely described.

Though Demetrius's love of Helena is a by-product of the magic potion rather than an expression of his natural feelings, love has been put into balance, allowing for a traditional marriage ending. As is often the case with Shakespeare, the dramatic situation is closely tied to the circumstances of the external environment; just as the conflict is ending and a semblance of order is restored among the characters, the sun comes up. There is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, as soon as the scenario has progressed to a suitable degree of complication and hilarity, Shakespeare simply invokes the fairies' magic to dispel all conflict. As the sun comes up, the reappearance of Theseus and Hippolyta, who symbolize the power and structure of the outside world, begins to dispel the magical dream of the play.

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend the play. They are extremely important figures both at its beginning and at its end, but they disappear entirely during the main action in the magical forest. The duke and his Amazon bride are romanticized in the play, but they belong solely to the nonmagical waking world, where they remain wholly in control of their own feelings and actions. An important element of the dream realm, as the lovers come to realize upon waking in a daze, is that one is in control of neither oneself nor one's surroundings. In this way, the forest and fairies contribute to the lovers' sense of their experience as a dream, even though the action happens largely while they are awake.

## **Act IV, scene ii**

At Quince's house, the craftsmen sit somberly and worry about their missing friend Bottom. Having last seen him shortly before the appearance of the ass-headed monster in the forest, the craftsmen worry that he has been felled by this terrifying creature. Starveling suspects that the fairies have cast some enchantment on Bottom. Flute asks whether they will go through with the play if Bottom does not return from the woods, and Peter Quince declares that to do so would be impossible, as Bottom is the only man in Athens capable of portraying Pyramus. The sad craftsmen agree that their friend is the wittiest, most intelligent, and best person in all of Athens.

Snug enters with an alarming piece of news: Theseus has been married, along with "two or three lords and ladies" (presumably Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena), and the newlyweds are eager to see a play (IV.ii.16). Flute laments Bottom's absence, noting that Bottom would certainly have won a great deal of money from the admiring duke for his portrayal of Pyramus.

Just then, Bottom bursts triumphantly into the room and asks why everyone looks so sad. The men are overjoyed to see him, and he declares that he has an amazing story to tell them about his adventure in the forest. Quince asks to hear it, but Bottom says that there is no time: they must don their costumes and go straight to the duke's palace to perform their play. As they leave, Bottom tells them not to eat onions or garlic before the play, as they must be prepared to "utter sweet breath" (IV.ii.36).

## Analysis

This brief comic scene returns the focus of the play to the subplot of the Athenian craftsmen. Structurally, Act IV, scene ii represents something of a new beginning for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the main conflict of the play has been resolved, but rather than ending with the weddings of the lovers, as is customary in an Elizabethan comedy (the weddings do not even occur onstage here), Shakespeare chooses to include an extended epilogue devoted to sheer comedy. The epilogue takes up all of Act V and centers around the craftsmen's performance of Pyramus and Thisbe for the Athenian crowd. Act IV, scene ii transfers the focus of the play from magic and unbalanced love to a play-within-a-play, in which the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not too heavy to begin with, are recycled into a form so ridiculous and garbled that the play draws to a wholly untroubled conclusion.

Though the preceding events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been far from tragic, many of the characters have experienced unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy, lovesickness, and insecurity. Act IV, scene ii makes a basic transition from sadness to joy as Bottom's return transforms his fellow craftsmen's sorrow and confusion into delight and eagerness. It is no coincidence that Bottom's reappearance occurs almost simultaneously with the audience being told that the lovers have been married. Just as the marriages dispel the romantic angst of the play, so does Bottom's return dispel the worry of his comrades. Similarly, the arrival in the forest of Theseus and Hippolyta, representatives of order, coincides with the Athenian lovers' waking from their chaotic, dreamlike romp of the previous night.

### Act V, scene i

At his palace, Theseus speaks with Hippolyta about the story that the Athenian youths have told them concerning the magical romantic mix-ups of the previous night. Theseus says that he does not believe the story, adding that darkness and love have a way of exciting the imagination. Hippolyta notes, however, that if their story is not true, then it is quite strange that all of the lovers managed to narrate the events in exactly the same way.

The youths enter and Theseus greets them heartily. He says that they should pass the time before bed with a performance, and he summons Egeus (or, in some editions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Philostrate) to read him a list of plays, each of which Theseus deems unacceptable. Egeus then tells him of the Pyramus and Thisbe story that the common craftsmen have prepared; warning that it is terrible in every respect, he urges Theseus not to see it. Theseus, however, says that if the craftsmen's intentions are dutiful, there will be something of merit in the play no matter how poor the performance.

The lords and ladies take their seats, and Quince enters to present a prologue, which he speaks haltingly. His strange pauses put the meaning of his words in question, so that he says, "Our true intent is. All for your delight / We are not here. That you should here repent you," though he means to communicate that "Our true intent is all for your delight. / We are not here that you should here repent you" (V.i.114–115). The other players then enter, including two characters performing the roles of Wall and Moonshine. They act out a clumsy version of the story, during which the noblemen and women joke among themselves about the actors' strange speeches and

misapprehensions. Bottom, in particular, makes many perplexing statements while playing Pyramus, such as “I see a voice...I can hear my Thisbe’s face” (V.i.190–191). Pyramus and Thisbe meet at, and speak across, the actor playing Wall, who holds up his fingers to indicate a chink. Snug, as the lion, enters and pours forth a speech explaining to the ladies that he is not really a lion. He roars, scaring Thisbe away, and clumsily rends her mantle. Finding the bloody mantle, Pyramus duly commits suicide. Thisbe does likewise when she finds her Pyramus dead. After the conclusion of the play, during which Bottom pretends to kill himself, with a cry of “die, die, die, die, die,” Bottom asks if the audience would like an epilogue or a bergamask dance; Theseus replies that they will see the dance (V.i.295). Bottom and Flute perform the dance, and the whole group exits for bed.

## **Act V, scene ii–epilogue**

Puck enters and says that, now that night has fallen, the fairies will come to the castle and that he has been “sent with broom before / To sweep the dust behind the door” (V.ii.19–20). Oberon and Titania enter and bless the palace and its occupants with a fairy song, so that the lovers will always be true to one another, their children will be beautiful, and no harm will ever visit Theseus and Hippolyta. Oberon and Titania take their leave, and Puck makes a final address to the audience. He says that if the play has offended, the audience should remember it simply as a dream. He wishes the audience members good night and asks them to give him their hands in applause if they are kind friends.

## **Analysis**

The structure of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is somewhat compacted in that the first four acts contain all of the play’s main action, with the height of conflict occurring in Act III and a happy turn of events resembling a conclusion in Act IV. Act V serves as a kind of joyful comic epilogue to the rest of the play, focusing on the craftsmen’s hilariously bungling efforts to present their play and on the noble Athenians’ good-natured jesting during the craftsmen’s performance. The heady tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe becomes comical in the hands of the craftsmen. The bearded Flute’s portrayal of the maiden Thisbe as well as the melodramatic (“Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall”) and nonsensical (“Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams”) language of the play strips the performance of any seriousness or profound meaning (V.i.174, V.i.261).

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which comes from an ancient Babylonian legend often reworked in European mythology, would have been familiar to educated members of Shakespeare’s audiences. The story likely influenced *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare also pulled elements from other versions of the *Romeo and Juliet* tale. In both stories, two young lovers from feuding families communicate under cover of darkness; both male lovers erroneously think their beloveds dead and commit suicide, and both females do likewise when they find their lovers dead.

## **Act V, scenes i–epilogue**

Insofar as the fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has thematic significance (the main purpose of the play-within-a-play is to provide comic enjoyment), it is that the Pyramus and Thisbe story revisits the themes of romantic hardship and confusion that run through the main action of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe are kept apart by parental will, just as Lysander and Hermia were; their tragic end results from misinterpretation—Pyramus takes Thisbe's bloody mantle as proof that she is dead, which recalls, to some extent, Puck's mistaking of Lysander for Demetrius (as well as Titania's misconception of Bottom as a beautiful lover). In this way, the play-within-a-play lightheartedly satirizes the anguish that earlier plagued the Athenian lovers.

Given the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is no surprise that one of the main themes of the play is dreams, particularly as they relate to darkness and love. When morning comes, ending the magical night in the forest, the lovers begin to suspect that their experience in the woods was merely a dream. Theseus suggests as much to Hippolyta, who finds it strange that all the young lovers would have had the same dream. In the famous final speech of the play, Puck turns this idea outward, recommending that if audience members did not enjoy the play, they should assume that they have simply been dreaming throughout. This suggestion captures perfectly the delicate, insubstantial nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just as the fairies mended their mischief by sorting out the romantic confusion of the young lovers, Puck accounts for the whimsical nature of the play by explaining it as a manifestation of the subconscious.

## **Characters**

### **Puck**

Also known as Robin Goodfellow, Puck is Oberon's jester, a mischievous fairy who delights in playing pranks on mortals. Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* divides its action between several groups of characters, Puck is the closest thing the play has to a protagonist. His enchanting, mischievous spirit pervades the atmosphere, and his antics are responsible for many of the complications that propel the other main plots: he mistakes the young Athenians, applying the love potion to Lysander instead of Demetrius, thereby causing chaos within the group of young lovers; he also transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass.

### **Oberon**

The king of the fairies, Oberon is initially at odds with his wife, Titania, because she refuses to relinquish control of a young Indian prince whom he wants for a knight. Oberon's desire for revenge on Titania leads him to send Puck to obtain the love-potion flower that creates so much of the play's confusion and farce.



## **Titania**

The beautiful queen of the fairies, Titania resists the attempts of her husband, Oberon, to make a knight of the young Indian prince that she has been given. Titania's brief, potion-induced love for Nick Bottom, whose head Puck has transformed into that of an ass, yields the play's foremost example of the contrast motif.

## **Lysander**

A young man of Athens, in love with Hermia. Lysander's relationship with Hermia invokes the theme of love's difficulty: he cannot marry her openly because Egeus, her father, wishes her to wed Demetrius; when Lysander and Hermia run away into the forest, Lysander becomes the victim of misapplied magic and wakes up in love with Helena.

## **Demetrius**

A young man of Athens, initially in love with Hermia and ultimately in love with Helena. Demetrius's obstinate pursuit of Hermia throws love out of balance among the quartet of Athenian youths and precludes a symmetrical two-couple arrangement.

## **Hermia**

Egeus's daughter, a young woman of Athens. Hermia is in love with Lysander and is a childhood friend of Helena. As a result of the fairies' mischief with Oberon's love potion, both Lysander and Demetrius suddenly fall in love with Helena. Self-conscious about her short stature, Hermia suspects that Helena has wooed the men with her height. By morning, however, Puck has sorted matters out with the love potion, and Lysander's love for Hermia is restored.

## **Helena**

A young woman of Athens, in love with Demetrius. Demetrius and Helena were once betrothed, but when Demetrius met Helena's friend Hermia, he fell in love with her and abandoned Helena. Lacking confidence in her looks, Helena thinks that Demetrius and Lysander are mocking her when the fairies' mischief causes them to fall in love with her.

## **Egeus**

Hermia's father, who brings a complaint against his daughter to Theseus: Egeus has given Demetrius permission to marry Hermia, but Hermia, in love with Lysander, refuses to marry Demetrius. Egeus's severe insistence that Hermia either respect his wishes or be held accountable to Athenian law places him squarely outside the whimsical dream realm of the forest.

## **Theseus**

The heroic duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta. Theseus represents power and order throughout the play. He appears only at the beginning and end of the story, removed from the dreamlike events of the forest.

## **Hippolyta**

The legendary queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus. Like Theseus, she symbolizes order.

## **Nick Bottom**

The overconfident weaver chosen to play Pyramus in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Bottom is full of advice and self-confidence but frequently makes silly mistakes and misuses language. His simultaneous nonchalance about the beautiful Titania's sudden love for him and unawareness of the fact that Puck has transformed his head into that of an ass mark the pinnacle of his foolish arrogance.

Peter Quince

A carpenter and the nominal leader of the craftsmen's attempt to put on a play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Quince is often shoved aside by the abundantly confident Bottom. During the craftsmen's play, Quince plays the Prologue.

## **Francis Flute**

The bellows-mender chosen to play Thisbe in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Forced to play a young girl in love, the bearded craftsman determines to speak his lines in a high, squeaky voice.

## **Robin Starveling**

The tailor chosen to play Thisbe's mother in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Moonshine.

## **Tom Snout**

The tinker chosen to play Pyramus's father in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Wall, dividing the two lovers.

## **Snug**

The joiner chosen to play the lion in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Snug worries that his roaring will frighten the ladies in the audience.

## **Philostrate**

Theseus's Master of the Revels, responsible for organizing the entertainment for the duke's marriage celebration.

## **Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed**

The fairies ordered by Titania to attend to Bottom after she falls in love with him.

## **Character Analysis**

### **Puck**

Though there is little character development in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and no true protagonist, critics generally point to Puck as the most important character in the play. The mischievous, quick-witted sprite sets many of the play's events in motion with his magic, by means of both deliberate pranks on the human characters (transforming Bottom's head into that of an ass) and unfortunate mistakes (smearing the love potion on Lysander's eyelids instead of Demetrius's).

More important, Puck's capricious spirit, magical fancy, fun-loving humor, and lovely, evocative language permeate the atmosphere of the play. Wild contrasts, such as the implicit comparison between the rough, earthy craftsmen and the delicate, graceful fairies, dominate *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck seems to illustrate many of these contrasts within his own character: he is graceful but not so saccharine as the other fairies; as Oberon's jester, he is given to a certain coarseness, which leads him to transform Bottom's head into that of an ass merely for the sake of enjoyment. He is good-hearted but capable of cruel tricks. Finally, whereas most of the fairies are beautiful and ethereal, Puck is often portrayed as somewhat bizarre looking. Indeed, another fairy mentions that some call Puck a "hobgoblin," a term whose connotations are decidedly less glamorous than those of "fairy" (II.i.40).

### **Nick Bottom**

Whereas Puck's humor is often mischievous and subtle, the comedy surrounding the overconfident weaver Nick Bottom is hilariously overt. The central figure in the subplot involving the craftsmen's production of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* story, Bottom dominates his fellow actors with an extraordinary belief in his own abilities (he thinks he is perfect for every part in the play) and his comical incompetence (he is a terrible actor and frequently makes rhetorical and grammatical mistakes in his speech). The humor surrounding Bottom often stems from the fact that he is totally unaware of his own ridiculousness; his speeches are overdramatic and self-aggrandizing, and he seems to believe that everyone takes him as seriously as he does himself. This foolish self-importance reaches its pinnacle after Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. When Titania, whose eyes have been anointed with a love potion, falls in love with the now ass-headed Bottom, he believes that the devotion of the beautiful, magical fairy queen is nothing out of the ordinary and that all of the trappings of her affection, including having servants attend him, are his proper due. His unawareness of the fact that his head has been transformed into that of an ass parallels his inability to perceive the absurdity of the idea that Titania could fall in love with him.

## Helena

Although Puck and Bottom stand out as the most personable characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they themselves are not involved in the main dramatic events. Of the other characters, Helena, the lovesick young woman desperately in love with Demetrius, is perhaps the most fully drawn. Among the quartet of Athenian lovers, Helena is the one who thinks most about the nature of love—which makes sense, given that at the beginning of the play she is left out of the love triangle involving Lysander, Hermia, and Demetrius. She says, “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,” believing that Demetrius has built up a fantastic notion of Hermia’s beauty that prevents him from recognizing Helena’s own beauty (I.i.234). Utterly faithful to Demetrius despite her recognition of his shortcomings, Helena sets out to win his love by telling him about the plan of Lysander and Hermia to elope into the forest. Once Helena enters the forest, many of her traits are drawn out by the confusion that the love potion engenders: compared to the other lovers, she is extremely unsure of herself, worrying about her appearance and believing that Lysander is mocking her when he declares his love for her.

## Theseus

As the duke of Athens, Theseus is the play’s central patriarchal figure. The audience gets a glimpse of Theseus’s patriarchal nature in the very first lines of the play, where he compares his forthcoming marriage to Hippolyta to a long-awaited inheritance. The comparison Theseus makes between marriage and wealth reveals his ideas about the value and meaning of love. Hippolyta is an Amazonian queen whom Theseus abducted during a battle and brought back to Athens like a trophy. Theseus’s patriarchal attitude is also partly responsible for setting the events of the play in motion. In the opening act of the play he presides over the dispute between Egeus and Hermia, and his overbearing attempt to get Hermia to obey her father’s command causes Hermia to flee Athens altogether. Theseus doesn’t change much over the course of the play. When Hippolyta points out that the lovers have told a consistent (if strange) story about their night in the forest, Theseus adamantly refuses to believe the lovers. By play’s end Theseus’ patriarchal attitude seems less problematic. After all, the quarrel between the lovers has worked itself out—though no thanks to him.

In addition to his role in *Midsummer*, Theseus is also an important figure in Greek myth, as educated members of Shakespeare’s audience would likely have known. One of the most notable themes that follows Theseus throughout Greek mythology is his relationships with women. In addition to stealing away with Hippolyta, he also abducted Helen and attempted to abduct the goddess Persephone. However, Theseus primarily gained fame as the heroic founder and defender of Athens. Perhaps the most famous myth involving Theseus is the story in which he kills the Minotaur, a legendary hybrid creature with the torso of a man and the head of a bull. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur also involves a relationship with a woman. In order to kill the Minotaur, Theseus has to find his way to the center of a labyrinth and back out again. He accomplishes this with the help of Ariadne, who gives him a ball of thread to mark his path in and out of the labyrinth. After escaping the labyrinth Theseus promises to marry Ariadne, but ends up abandoning her.

## Hermia

Hermia is one of the strongest female characters in the play. She passionately rejects male authority figures in order to make a powerful claim for her own “sovereignty” in the realm of love. Hermia’s strength is most evident in the opening scene, where she faces off with her father, Egeus, in front of Duke Theseus. In the face of these men’s patriarchal attitudes, Hermia handles herself with poise and unflinching directness. For example, she responds to Theseus’s demand for obedience with these uncompromising words: “So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, / Ere I will yield my virgin patent up / Unto his Lordship” (I.i.). Theseus outlines harsh consequences if Hermia persists in disobeying her father’s authority. Hermia faces a difficult choice: she must either marry Demetrius, or else give up all freedom and become a nun. In order to avoid the awful choice presented to her, Hermia decides to pursue true love by fleeing Athens with Lysander. Hermia’s flight represents her greatest act of defiance against the patriarchal order.

Despite Hermia’s powerful demonstration of autonomy, the chaos that ensues in the forest wears Hermia down. Once Lysander is charmed by Puck and directs his affections toward Helena, Hermia quickly succumbs to anger. In Act III she takes her frustration out on Helena, calling her oldest friend names and saying cruel things. By the middle of the play Hermia no longer seems a paragon of female autonomy. Her animosity fades once morning comes and order is restored; with Lysander at Hermia’s side once again, and with Demetrius at Helena’s side, all quarrels cease. Hermia admits in Act IV that she still feels the residue of the night’s confusion, but she shows no further sign of emotional disturbance. Intriguingly, given her prominent role in the play’s first four acts, Hermia has no lines in Act V. Despite being present for the craftsmen’s performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, she effectively disappears from the play. Although there are ultimately no major consequences for Hermia’s defiance earlier in the play, her disappearance may indicate a different kind of punishment: a silencing of her impassioned voice.

## Themes

### Love’s Difficulty

“The course of true love never did run smooth,” comments Lysander, articulating one of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s most important themes—that of the difficulty of love (I.i.134). 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 lovers' 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 (symbolized 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 (I.i.7–8). The theme of dreaming recurs predominantly when characters attempt to explain bizarre events in which these characters are involved: "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it 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, 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 members themselves, saying that, if they have been offended by 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.

## **Jealousy**

The theme of jealousy operates in both the human and fairy realms in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Jealousy plays out most obviously among the quartet of Athenian lovers, who find themselves in an increasingly tangled knot of misaligned desire. Helena begins the play feeling jealous of Hermia, who has managed to snag not one but two suitors. Helena loves Demetrius, who in turn feels jealous of his rival for Hermia's affections, Lysander. When misplaced fairy mischief leads Lysander into an amorous pursuit of Helena, the event drives Hermia into her own jealous rage. Jealousy also extends into the fairy realm, where it has caused a rift between the fairy king and queen. As we learn in Act II, King Oberon and Queen Titania both have eyes for their counterparts in the human realm, Theseus and Hippolyta. Titania accuses Oberon of stealing away with "the bouncing Amazon" (II.i.). Oberon accuses Titania of hypocrisy, since she also loves another: "How canst thou thus for shame, Titania, / Glance at my credit with Hippolyta, / Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?" (II.i.). This jealous rift incites Oberon to command Puck to fetch the magic flower that eventually causes so much chaos and confusion for the Athenian lovers.

## **Mischief**

In *Midsummer*, mischief is primarily associated with the forest and the fairies who reside there. Accordingly, the fairies of traditional British folklore are master mischief makers. The trickster fairy Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow) is the play's chief creator of mischief. Puck's reputation as a troublemaker precedes him, as suggested in the first scene of Act II, where an unnamed fairy recognizes Puck and rhapsodizes about all the tricks Puck has played on unsuspecting humans. Although in the play Puck only retrieves and uses the magical flower at Oberon's request, his mistakes in implementing Oberon's plan have the most chaotic effects. Puck also makes mischief of his own accord, as when he transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. Puck is also the only character who explicitly talks about his love of mischief. When in Act III he declares that "those things do best please me / That befall prepost'rously" (III.ii.), he effectively announces a personal philosophy of mischief and an appreciation for turning things on their head.

## **Transformation**

Many examples of emotional and physical transformation occur in *Midsummer*. These transformations contribute to the play's humorous chaos, and also make its happy ending possible. Most of the transformations that take place in the play derive from fairy magic, specifically the magic of Puck. Perhaps the most obvious example is when Puck assists Oberon in placing a charm on Titania and two of the Athenian lovers in order to transform their affections. Instead of helping the lovers, Puck's meddling amplifies the tensions that already existed among them. Puck wreaks further havoc when he physically transforms Bottom, "translating" his head into the head of a donkey. Bottom's transformation inspires terror among Bottom's companions, who fear that his change bears the marks of a devil. Although these transformations initially stimulate conflict and fear, they ultimately help to restore order. By the end of the night, the Athenian lovers all end up in their proper pairings and are able to return safely to Athens.

Likewise, after Titania awakens from her bizarre coupling with Bottom, she and Oberon are able to settle their quarrel. The many transformations therefore enable the play's happy ending.

### **Unreason**

The many transformations that take place in *Midsummer* give rise to a temporary suspension of reason. As night progresses in the forest, things cease to make sense. For example, Hermia falls asleep near Lysander but then wakes to find him gone. When she eventually finds him again, Lysander does the verbal equivalent of spitting in Hermia's face: "Could not this make thee know / The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?" (III.ii.). Completely floored by the sudden reversal of Lysander's former love, Hermia senses a failure of reason: "You speak not as you think" (III.ii.). A more humorous version of unreason occurs when Bottom, recently crowned with the head of a donkey, finds himself nestling with Titania in her bower. Even though Bottom doesn't know about his physical transformation, he's self-aware enough to see the absurdity of the situation. When Titania professes her love for Bottom, he responds coolly: "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that" (III.i.). By turns disturbing and amusing, these and other examples of unreason in the play function to amplify the chaos and confusion traditionally associated with fairies and the forest.

### **Reversal**

Situations transform quickly into their opposites throughout the play. Most obviously, the charm Puck uses to transform the Athenian lovers' affections creates sudden reversals of love and hate, and these reversals result in a breakdown of reason. The sudden reversal of Lysander's affection for Hermia not only leaves his former lover stunned, but also shocks Helena, who suddenly finds herself being pursued by Lysander. All of the madcap foolery that plays out in the forest arises from Oberon's original idea to affect just one strategic reversal. In Act II, when Oberon spies on Helena chasing after Demetrius, Helena comments that her pursuit reverses the natural order of things: "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase. / The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind / Makes speed to catch the tiger." (II.i.) According to Helena, this state of affairs creates "a scandal for my sex." Hearing Helena, Oberon promises to reverse the reversal, thereby restoring order: "Ere he do leave this grove / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love" (II.i.).

### **Setting**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place partly in the city of Athens, and partly in the forest that lies beyond the city's walls. This split between city and forest is thematically significant. The city of Athens is depicted as a place of civilization, law, and order, while the forest is a place of wildness, anarchy, and chaos. As if to underline the idea of Athens as a place of law and order, the play opens with Egeus bringing a legal dispute before Theseus. As duke of Athens, Theseus stands as the city's chief legal authority. His primary responsibility is to uphold the law, which he attempts to do when he rules that Hermia must obey her father and marry Demetrius instead of Lysander. In contrast to this display of Athenian rule of law, the forest appears decidedly unruly—which is to say, ruled by fairy mischief. The forest is a place where social norms break down, as exemplified in the increasing chaos and confusion that afflicts the Athenian lovers as well as Titania and Nick Bottom.



Even as Shakespeare sets up an opposition between city and forest, the events of the play complicate this opposition. Athens supposedly symbolizes civilization, and its system of law and order indicates a degree of rationality. Yet the grim punishment Theseus threatens in the event of Hermia's disobedience seems completely out of proportion for her crime. Her crime, after all, is simply loving Lysander—a man, it should be noted, who possesses a similar status as her father's favorite, Demetrius. Considering that from a socioeconomic perspective the two rivals are well matched, it makes rational sense that Hermia should be able to marry whichever suitor she wants. Thus, Egeus and the patriarchal law he cites can be seen as cruel, uncivilized, and irrational. A similar reversal occurs in the case of the forest. The forest is a space marked by chaos, and indeed, lots of chaotic events occur in the forest over the course of the play. Yet these events have the unexpected result of restoring proper order among the young lovers, ensuring them all a safe return to Athens. Where Athenian law and order fails, forest mischief ultimately succeeds.

## **Symbols**

### **Theseus and Hippolyta**

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, appearing in the daylight at both the beginning and the end of the play's main action. They disappear, however, for the duration of the action, leaving in the middle of Act I, scene i and not reappearing until Act IV, as the sun is coming up to end the magical night in the forest. Shakespeare uses Theseus and Hippolyta, the ruler of Athens and his warrior bride, to represent order and stability, to contrast with the uncertainty, instability, and darkness of most of the play. Whereas an important element of the dream realm is that one is not in control of one's environment, Theseus and Hippolyta are always entirely in control of theirs. Their reappearance in the daylight of Act IV to hear Theseus's hounds signifies the end of the dream state of the previous night and a return to rationality.

### **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-headed 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 behavior and cannot be resisted.

### **The Craftsmen's Play**

The play-within-a-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 craftsmen 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-within-a-play, just as Hermia and Lysander do; the theme of romantic confusion enhanced by the darkness of night is rehashed, 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 craftsmen'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.

## **Genre**

### **Comedy**

In telling the story of several sets of lovers who must overcome obstacles and misunderstandings before they are finally united in marriage, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an example of Shakespearean comedy. The play's central couples, Hermia and Lysander and Helena and Demetrius, begin the play facing two classic obstacles of Shakespearean comedy: parental disapproval and misdirected love. Hermia's father forbids her to marry Lysander, insisting that she marry Demetrius instead. According to Athenian law, Hermia faces death or exile if she disobeys her father. Meanwhile, Helena loves Demetrius, but his love is currently directed at Hermia. These initial obstacles become confused and compounded when the couples enter the forest. The fairy Puck's mistaken enchantments result first in Lysander loving Helena, and then in both men loving Helena, a reversal of the play's opening. But by the next morning, the confusion has been resolved. Lysander's enchantment has been removed while Demetrius's enchantment remains, and the couples are for the first time happily balanced. The couples' final barrier is overcome when Theseus overrules Hermia's father's wishes, and the play ends as all Shakespearean comedies do: with a wedding.

Like other Shakespearean comedies, *Midsummer* focuses on the characters' situations rather than their emotions. For example, in the play's first scene, rather than dwelling in despair because they are forbidden to be together, Hermia and Lysander focus on a solution and make a secret plan to escape. Later, the fairy king Oberon witnesses Helena pledging her devotion to Demetrius and immediately decides to intervene when Demetrius harshly rejects her. Both the lovers' decision to go into the forest and the fairies' decision to intercede in the lovers' lives create situations that confuse and trouble the lovers. However, as audience members we are never seriously worried that the outcome will be anything but happy because the play's fantastical situations and overwrought language distance us from the lovers' pain. Secure in our knowledge that the magical mistakes will eventually be repaired and that order will be restored, we can enjoy watching the drama unfold.