

A Midsummer Night's Dream Introduction

William Shakespeare, 1590s, performed in 1594-96

William Shakespeare

- His father was a glove maker and both he and his family received no school education besides grammar.
- Married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind in 1590 when he moved to London where he became an actor and a playwright.
- He soon became the most popular playwright of his day as well as a part-time owner of the Globe Theatre.
- His theatre troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603.
- Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613 and died 3 years later to pneumonia.
- Most influential writer in the English language.
- He wrote A Midsummer Night's Dream at the same time he wrote Romeo and Juliet, which is ironic because R&J is the greatest love story ever told and AMND is a rhetorical mockery of love stories

Characters

1. Theseus and Hippolyta come from an English translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, which is a series of 48 biographies of famous men written in the 2nd century.
2. Pyramus and Thisby is a tale by Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which is a story about a man who transformed into an insect overnight
3. Titania comes from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*
4. Apuleis' *Golden Ass*, is a tale of a man who turned into a donkey (ass), which is about Lucius, a character who is turned into a donkey by a witch, written in the 2nd century.
5. Oberon comes from a medieval French romance called *Huon of Bordeaux*, which is about a knight who kills Charlot, the son of the Emperor Charlemagne, written in the 13th century.
6. The general plot of two lovers fighting to marry according to their will in defiance of their fathers was standard in both Greek and Roman drama from classical times.

Literary Renaissance Period (1400-1700)

Was a period of European cultural, artistic, political, and economic rebirth followed by the Middle Ages.

The renaissance promoted the rediscovery of classical philosophy, literature, and art.

The Middle Ages (known as the Dark Ages), was an era in which little advances were made in science and art because of the overly religious politics of the time.

The Renaissance is known as the Light age in which more freedom of thinking ensued.

Setting

City of Athens and the forest just outside, in some distant, ancient time when it was ruled by the mythological hero, Theseus.

Plot

In the palace in ancient Athens, Duke Theseus and his fiancé Hippolyta are planning their wedding festivities when Egeus, an Athenian nobleman, arrives.

Egeus' daughter, Hermia, and two other men, Lysander and Demetrius arrive with him.

Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius, but she loves Lysander.

- He asks Theseus to uphold Athenian law, which forces a woman to marry the man her father chooses or be executed.
- Lysander points out that Demetrius is an inconsistent lover, who had until recently loved Hermia's childhood friend, Helena before falling for Hermia.
- Theseus says he must uphold Athenian law and exits.

Lysander and Hermia decide to elope by escaping into the forest outside Athens.

They only tell Helena, but she tells Demetrius hoping it will make him love her again.

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of manual labourers discuss a play, *Pyramus and Thisby*, which they hope to perform at the Duke's wedding. Bottom, is a weaver with many ridiculous opinions about acting, gets the part of Pyramus.

They all agree to rehearse in the forest outside Athens for privacy.

Meanwhile, in the forest, Oberon, the king of the fairies is fighting with his queen, Titania over the possession of a beautiful Indian changeling boy.

Oberon decides to punish his wife for refusing to obey him.

He sends his servant, Robin Goodfellow (Puck), a mischievous fairy, to bring him the love-in-idleness flower, for its magical juices causes a person (or fairy) to fall in love with the first thing he or she sees.

Just then, Oberon sees Helena following Demetrius through the forest and hears him threaten to abandon her.

Oberon decides to make Demetrius fall in love with Helena and tells Puck to put the love juice in the eyes of the man in Athenian clothing.

He sneaks away to a sleeping Titania and drops the potion on her eyes.

Lysander and Hermia get lost in the forest and find a place to sleep, apart, for the night.

Puck sees Lysander's Athenian clothes and puts the love juice on his eyelids.

Nearby, Demetrius finally abandons Helena.

Lysander wakes and sees Helena, falling in love with her.

Helena thinks Lysander is mocking her with his declarations of love, and stalks off, with him following her.

Hermia wakes up, shocked that Lysander is gone, and goes to search for him.

The labourers rehearse their play in the forest, close to where Titania is sleeping.

They can't remember their lines or cues, amusing Puck who is watching them.

Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass; the other labourers are terrified and run away.

Bottom thinks they're playing a joke on him and he starts singing, waking up Titania causing her to instantly fall in love with him.

Oberon is pleased with Puck's work until he discovers that he put the juice in Lysander's eyelids, instead of Demetrius'.

He sends Puck to bring Helena to Demetrius and puts the love potion in his eyes as well.

Helena arrives followed by Lysander, and when Demetrius awakes, he instantly falls in love with Helena.

Both men argue over who loves her more, whilst she thinks that they're simply mocking her, because she knows that they both love Hermia.

But then, Hermia shows up, furious that Lysander is now wooing Helena.

Helena and Hermia are on the verge of fighting, when the men go off to duel in the forest.

Helena runs and Hermia chases her, engaging in a fight themselves.

Oberon sends Puck out to make sure that no one hurts each other, and he uses his trickery to get them all to fall asleep in the same glade and then puts the juice on Lysander's eyes, so that he will fall in love with Hermia again.

Titania is still dotting on Bottom, and has given Oberon the changeling.

While she sleeps again, he removes the spell, and Puck removes Bottom's ass-head.

On a hunting expedition in the forest, Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus encounter the four sleeping lovers.

When Lysander admits that he and Hermia were eloping, Egeus insists that the law be brought down on their heads.

But, Theseus sees that Lysander now loves Hermia while Demetrius loves Helena, and says the four lovers can marry at his wedding.

At the same time, Bottom returns to Athens just as the labourers were starting to despair they wouldn't have their Pyramus and wouldn't be able to perform.

As entertainment after the wedding, the Duke chooses to watch the labourer's play. It is terrible and ridiculous, but the Duke and lovers enjoy making fun of it.

After the 3 married couples go to bed, the Fairies enter and bless the marriages.

Characters

Robin Goodfellow (Puck): a type of fairy called a "puck", He is Oberon's faithful servant, but is also mischievous and enjoys nothing more than playing tricks and causing trouble. He has all sorts of magical abilities, from changing shape, to turning invisible, to assuming different people's voices, to transforming a man's head into an ass' head. He is not, however, beyond making a mistake, as his mix-up between Demetrius and Lysander makes clear.

- Based on *Cupid*, the son of Zeus from Ancient Greek mythology, which was the messenger for the gods as well as the trickster who fooled around with his bow and arrow, in which he shot people making them fall in love.

Nick Bottom: A weaver who's supreme confidence in his acting skill convinces the other labourers to give him the lead role of Pyramus in their version of Pyramus and Thisbe. In fact, Bottom is a seriously incompetent actor who understands neither his lines nor theater in general. All this makes him a profoundly funny character. Because he has no idea he's incompetent, he never ceases to make long, overly dramatic speeches filled with incorrect references and outright absurdities. Even when Puck transforms his head into an ass's head, Bottom fails to realize it and takes it as unsurprising when Titania falls in love with him. Yet though Bottom is certainly extremely foolish and self-important, he means well.

- Bottom and ass are both synonyms for "bum", which also has a double meaning, for someone who is stupid.

Hermia: The daughter of Egeus and the beloved of Lysander and Demetrius (at least at the beginning of the play). She is strong-willed, believes in her right to choose her husband based on love, and is fiercely loyal. When crossed, Hermia can become a downright vixen. Hermia is beautiful and has dark hair, though she's small in stature and somewhat sensitive about it.

Helena: She loves Demetrius, and at one time he returned her love. But before the play begins, he falls in love with Hermia and leaves Helena in despair. Because of Demetrius's abandonment of her, Helena lacks self-confidence and self-respect, going so far as to tell Demetrius that she'll love and follow him even if he treats her like his dog. She's also a bit conniving and desperate, willing to betray her friend Hermia's confidence in order to try to win back Demetrius's love. Physically, she's tall and blond.

Lysander: An Athenian nobleman who loves Hermia. In many ways, he is the model of a constant lover. He risks death under Athenian law by coming up with the plan to elope into the woods with Hermia, and only strays from his loyalty to Hermia under the influence of the love juice. When the effect of the spell is removed, he returns to his true love.

Demetrius: An Athenian nobleman who also loves Hermia. Unlike Lysander, Demetrius is an inconstant lover. Before the events of the play, he wooed Helena, then rejected her and pursued Hermia. He can be cruel at times, as when he threatens to abandon Helena in the forest, and there's no indication he would ever have come to return Helena's love without the influence of the love potion.

Oberon: The King of the Fairies and Titania's husband. Oberon is willful and demands obedience from his subjects, including his wife. When he's angry, he's not above using magic and plots to manipulate and humiliate in order to get his way. Yet at the same time he also seems to like using magic to fix problems he sees around him, particularly those having to do with love. He's had numerous extra-marital affairs.

- Based on Zeus, which is the supreme god of Ancient Greek mythology, who is known for having many wives and the creator of the Olympian gods, after he overthrew his father, a Titan.

Titania: The Queen of the Fairies and Oberon's wife. Titania is strong-willed and independent, willing to fight her husband for control of the changeling boy. She is also powerful. Her fight with her husband causes nature to act strangely, and her fairies always follow her commands. She is not, however, immune to the power of the juice from the love-in-idleness flower. As a lover, she is doting, though jealous. It also seems that, like her husband, through the years she's had many extramarital amorous affairs.

- Based on Hera, Zeus' seventh and final wife, who is strong-willed and fiercely protective of her daughter, Persephone. She was the goddess of childbirth and the harvest.

Theseus: The Duke of Athens and the fiancé and later the husband of Hippolyta, Theseus is a strong and responsible leader who tries to be

fair and sensitive. Though it is his duty to uphold the law, and he does so when both Lysander and Demetrius love Hermia, as soon as the lovers sort themselves out, he overrules Egeus' demand that Hermia marry Demetrius and let the lovers decide for themselves whom to marry. He also treats the labourers decently, despite the fact that their play is atrocious. Though a fearsome warrior (he captured Hippolyta, an Amazon queen, in battle), he is devoted to making her happy. Theseus is, however, extremely literal-minded, and gives little credence to the "fantasies" the lovers recount of their night in the forest.

Hippolyta: The Queen of the Amazons and Theseus's fiancé, she is both a fearsome warrior and a loving woman. She also has good common sense and is willing to disagree with Theseus's assessments of events and to calm him down when he can't wait for their marriage.

Egeus: Hermia's father, Egeus is an overbearing and rigid man who cares more about what he wants than his daughter's desires. He is so vain and uncaring, he is willing to let his daughter die if she won't do as he tells her.

Peter Quince: A carpenter and the director and main writer of the labourer's version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. He plays the prologue in the play within a play.

Francis Flute: a bellows-mender who plays the part of Thisbe.
- Specialist of leather work.

Tom Snout: a tinker who plays the part of the wall.
- Works with cheap metal, making pots and pans.

Snug: a joiner who plays the part of the Lion
- A joiner is someone who joins pieces of wood to make furniture, however, a carpenter was more known for working with wood to create accents and more artistic work.

Robin Starveling: a tailor who plays the part of Moonshine

Philostrate: the Master of Revels for Theseus; he's in charge of arranging entertainments for the court.

Peaseblossom: one of Titania's fairies.

Cobweb: one of Titania's fairies.

Mote: one of Titania's fairies

Mustardseed: one of Titania's fairies.

Themes

Love: A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play about love. All of its action—from the escapades of Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena in the forest, to the argument between Oberon and Titania, to the play about two lovelorn youths that Bottom and his friends perform at Duke Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta—are motivated by love. But A Midsummer Night's Dream is not a romance, in which the audience gets caught up in a passionate love affair between two characters. It's a comedy, and because it's clear from the outset that it's a comedy and that all will turn out happily, rather than try to overcome the audience with the exquisite and overwhelming passion of love, A Midsummer Night's Dream invites the audience to laugh at the way the passion of love can make people blind, foolish, inconstant, and desperate. At various times, the power and passion of love threatens to destroy friendships, turn men against men and women against women, and through the argument between Oberon and Titania throws nature itself into turmoil. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, love is a force that characters cannot control, a point amplified by workings of the love potion, which literally makes people slaves to love. And yet, A Midsummer Night's Dream ends happily, with three marriages blessed by the reconciled fairy King and Queen. So even as A Midsummer Night's Dream makes fun of love's effects on both men and women and points out that when it comes to love there's nothing really new to say, its happy ending reaffirms love's importance, beauty, and timeless relevance.

Play Within a Play: A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play containing other plays. The most obvious example is the labourers' performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, and their inept production serves three important functions in the larger structure of the larger play.

1. The labourer's mistakes and misunderstandings introduce a strand of farce to the comedy of the larger play.
2. It allows Shakespeare to comment on the nature of art and theater, primarily through the labourer's own confused belief that the audience won't be able to distinguish between fiction and reality.
3. The labourers' play parodies much of the rest of A Midsummer Night's Dream: Pyramus and Thisbe are lovers who, facing opposition from their parents, elope, just as Hermia and Lysander do.

So even as the lovers and Theseus make fun of the labourers' ridiculous performance, the audience, which is watching the lovers watch the labourers' play, is aware that the lovers had been just as absurd.

A Midsummer Night's Dream also contains a second, subtler, play within a play. In this play within a play, Oberon is playwright, and he seeks to "write" a comedy in which Helena gets her love, Lysander and Hermia stay together, Titania learns a lesson in wifely

obedience, and all conflicts are resolved through marriage and reconciliation. And just as the labourers' play turns a tragic drama into a comic farce, so does Oberon's when Puck accidentally puts the love-potion on the eyes of the wrong Athenian man. And yet Oberon's play also serves a counter purpose to the labourers' play. While the labourers' awful performance seems to suggest the limit of the theater, Oberon's play, which rewrote the lives of the same mortals who mock the labourers' play, suggests that theater really does have a magic that defies reality.

Dreams: After their surreal night of magic and mayhem in the forest, both the lovers and Bottom describe what happened to them as a "dream." They use the word "dream" to describe their experiences, because they wouldn't otherwise be able to understand the bizarre and irrational things that they remember happening to them in the forest. By calling their experiences dreams, Bottom and the lovers allow those experiences to exist as they are, without need for explanation or understanding.

As Bottom says: "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it was. Man is but an ass if he goes about t'expound this dream" (IV.i.200-201).

In a famous speech near the end of the play, Duke Theseus brushes off the lovers' tale of their night in the forest, and goes so far as to condemn the imagination of all lovers, madmen, and poets as full of illusion and untruths. But Theseus's argument overlooks that it is reason, as set down in the law of Athens, that caused all the problems to begin with. And it was the "dream" within the forest that solved those problems. Through this contrast, the play seems to be suggesting that dreams and imagination are as useful as reason, and can sometimes create truths that transcend reason's limits.

Men and Women: The relationship between men and women echoes across both the mortal and fairy worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. More specifically, both the fairy and mortal plots in the play deal with an attempt by male authority figures to control women. Though Theseus and Hippolyta appear to share a healthy loving relationship, it is a love built upon a man asserting power over a woman: Theseus won Hippolyta's love by defeating her in battle. Oberon creates the love juice in an attempt to control his disobedient wife. Egeus seeks to control his daughter's marriage. And while the play ends happily, with everyone either married or reconciled, the love on display is of a very particular kind: it is a love in which women accept a role subservient to their husbands. To a modern audience this likely seems rather offensive, but an Elizabethan (Queen Elizabeth was the leading monarch at the time) audience would have generally accepted that men are the head of the household just as the king is the head of society. Also, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests that love can also take a terrible toll on same-sex friendships. Even before the lovers get into the forest, Helena betrays her friend Hermia for love. And

once they do get into the forest, all the intense feelings nearly cause the men to duel and brings the women almost to blows as well.

The Supernatural: In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare has created a fantastical world of fairies and magic. And this world is not just a pretty backdrop for the events of the play. The fairies and their magic are the engine of the plot: Oberon's love juice sets the plot in motion, Puck's mistakes applying the juice and his mischievous transformation of Bottom's head into an ass's head complicates it, and Puck's tricks and illusions to keep the mortals while he fixes his love juice errors bring everything to a resolution. And in the face of this magic, mortal dilemmas such as the laws of Athens fall away.

Symbolic Theme

The Love Juice: In its supernatural power to make one person fall in love with another no matter their previous desires, statements, status, or power, the love juice symbolizes *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* vision of love as an irrational, unpredictable, and downright fickle force that completely overwhelms and transforms people, whether they want it to or not.