

EDUCATION GUIDEBOOK

A Resource for Teachers and Students

Summer 2018



# A Midsummer Night's DREAM

*Shakespeare in the Park 2018*

Directed by Jaclynn Jutting

Education Sponsor:



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## What to Expect...

### **At the Centennial Park Band shell and Franklin Academy Park**

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival will have performances of A Midsummer Night's Dream beginning at 7:30 pm at the band shell in Nashville's Centennial Park, August 9th through September 9th. The production will move to Franklin's Academy Park for it's closing weekend, September 13-16th.

Centennial Park Band shell



Franklin Academy Park



### ...During The Performance

The band shell and Academy Park are open-air theaters. Theatergoers are invited to bring blankets and lawn chairs, or cushions for bench seating. Each night, food trucks are present for pre-show and intermission, or patrons may bring picnics. Many parking areas surround the parks. Audience members can expect to be up close and personal with actors entering through aisles and playing down on the stage thrust.

Because this show is performed al fresco, the audience will hear street noises, airplanes and helicopters, and Vanderbilt Football cheering. However, outdoor theater creates an inviting, casual atmosphere that dissolves any concerns that audience members might have of Shakespeare's language being impossible to understand. Because the actors help to immerse the audience in the story and world of the play, complexities become easier to understand and new light is shined on the play's brilliance.

A Midsummer Night's Dream will be a fun and engaging experience. Please remain respectful to the actors and fellow audience members throughout the performance.

**Please turn off and put away all cell phones and digital devices before the show begins.**

**Ushers will kindly remind you of this during the show, should they find it necessary.**

**Please remain in your seats and refrain from talking or whispering while the show is in progress.**

**Remember: Actors can see and hear you just as you can see and hear them!**

### ...After you leave

What new questions do you have about the characters and the story?

How did the design elements (costume, lights, sound, props, set etc.) help tell the story?

Do you relate to any of the characters or their experiences?

# Director's Note

“Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.”

- Helena (Act 1, Scene 1)

When I picked up *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to start work on this classic, one of the first things that rose from the page was Shakespeare's exploration of the variants of love. Everywhere I looked was love: lovers forged by the necessity of state and peace, young lovers, jealous lovers, the love between sisters and comrades, the mistaken love of a queen who literally wakes up in love with an ass, and a play-within-a-play created by amateur artists, who depict the ends one would go to for love.

Historically rumored to be written by Shakespeare to celebrate the nuptials of Elizabethan nobles, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* calls upon a holiday derived from the pagans, which celebrated a singular night of the year when young lovers would sleep and dream of their true love. For me, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the act of falling in love, a powerful, encompassing bit of magic. It is a force of nature: both jointly irrefutably true and powerful, but also can prove, occasionally and painfully, to be an illusion.

The Greeks called love, “the madness of the Gods” because of the effects of love on the beloved. Set in Nashville's Centennial park, next to our own Parthenon, Nashville Shakespeare Festival's anniversary production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* brings Shakespeare's fairy-filled Athens to “the Athens of the South.” In a contemporary blend of 2018 and ancient Greece, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* explores the conflict between 4 couples of lovers—young and old, worldly and magical. This powerful exploration of the centrifugal force of love is as old as the Greek myths of Ovid but as relevant to us today.

With a bit of music and imagination, we hope you enjoy this play about love. It is the dream that we want to be ensnared in. Powerful, magical and life altering, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* explores the uncontrollable nature of love.

Jaclynn Jutting

Director, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

## Letter from the Artistic Director, Denice Hicks

Greetings,

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival is celebrating 30 years of Shakespeare in the Park with *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*, one of Shakespeare's most beloved plays. We're hoping this summer's rollicking version delights everyone who has the chance to see it.

We know that Shakespeare can be daunting, and we believe the process of preparing to view and appreciate a play is as important as the event itself. Designed to facilitate that preparation, we offer this guidebook, which includes facts on Shakespeare's life and times, information pertaining specifically to our production, and exploratory in-class activities. We hope this helps you gain insight into the play and this production, and that the guidebook will provide some tools and inspiration for you and your students to "act out" Shakespeare as a part of your studying his works.

*The MIDSUMMER guidebook also features contributions from members of the creative team, including the director, text consultants, designers, and other contributors. As with any quality theatrical experience, the process is never complete until you participate! The success of Shakespearean plays relies on audience participation and we have confidence that this guidebook will help you prepare yourself and your students for this experience.*

The Festival is currently offering close to 100 workshops per year, and we invite you to explore our workshop offerings on our website: [nashvilleshakes.org](http://nashvilleshakes.org). Many of the actors you see on our stage are trained teaching artists, and it certainly adds fun and resonance to the performance when the students recognize "their" teaching artist on stage.

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival is dedicated to keeping Shakespeare's works alive and relevant in a society that struggles with meaningful communication, authentic presence, and inconsequential entertainment options. We relish the opportunity to bring Shakespeare's 400 year-old characters to life in Nashville, and revel when our work sparks interest in literature, history, poetry and other human interests. The humans in this play should seem quite familiar to you and your students, and the fairies should awaken your imaginations to unseen worlds.

Thank you for teaching the works of William Shakespeare. I hope the rewards are greater than the challenges.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the production, please do not hesitate to contact us: [education@nashvilleshakes.org](mailto:education@nashvilleshakes.org)

Enjoy the show!

Denice Hicks, Artistic Director

## A Midsummer Night's Dream Plot Summary

By Dr. Marcia McDonald, NSF Board President

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* tells three interwoven stories framed by the nuptials of Duke Theseus of Athens and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. The main love plot involves Hermia, who wants to marry Lysander against the wishes of her parents, who want her to marry Demetrius. Demetrius had loved Helena but changes his affections for Hermia. To escape this arranged marriage, Lysander and Hermia take off for the woods, but Helena (Hermia's BFF) tells Demetrius in hopes of recovering his affection. Soon, all four lovers are in the woods, which, unbeknownst to them, is populated by cute sprites and fairies, with Puck their ringleader, who serve the King and Queen of the Fairies, Oberon and Titania.

The second main story is that of a group of workers, or "mechanicals," in Athens who hope to perform a play to celebrate Theseus and Hippolyta's nuptials. They are all apprehensive about this project, with the notable exception of Bottom the Weaver, but promise to meet in the woods outside Athens at night to rehearse. They do meet in the woods, and while in the midst of their rehearsal, are subjected to Puck's mischief, including planting an ass's head on Bottom.

These two plots intersect with a third plot, which originates in the quarrel between Oberon and Titania about the relationships of each to Theseus and Hippolyta and Oberon's demand for Titania's little changeling boy. To achieve this demand, Oberon instructs Puck, his right-hand sprite, to find a "little western flower" containing magical juice that makes a person madly dote on any creature who appears. Puck squeezes the juice on the sleeping Titania's eyes; meanwhile Oberon has observed Demetrius disparaging Helena and asks Puck to squeeze the juice on Demetrius's eyes also. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius (well, can you keep them straight?!), juices his eyes, and Lysander wakes up, sees Helena, and declares his undying love.

## Plot Summary Continued

If you are following the summaries of these plot lines, you can guess what comes next: chaos! The love plot intensifies with Lysander and Demetrius both pursuing Helena, Hermia feeling betrayed, and lively quarreling among all four. Finally, Puck leads them to a place to sleep and puts an antidote to the fairy juice on Lysander's eyes. When they awake, each is properly in love, Lysander with Hermia and Demetrius with Helena.

Titania awakes to dote madly upon the strange figure of Bottom with his ass's head. She adorns him with flowers and her fairies attend to him; with Titania distracted, Oberon secures the little changeling boy. Finally, Puck reverses the fairy juice on Titania.

When the morning comes, the lovers are discovered by Theseus and Hippolyta, who are riding out to hunt; Theseus overrules Egeus and blesses the love of Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius. Titania awakes to find out, to her distress, that she has been doting on Bottom, and she and Oberon reconcile in a dance, accompanied by the fairies. Bottom awakes, exclaiming about his amazing dream—a dream like no other—and heads to Athens to find his company. All these plots are brought together in the celebratory wedding (three marriages!), for which Bottom's troupe is selected to provide a play. Their play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, is a Romeo-and-Juliet type tragedy performed with more love than skill, but to the great delight of both the stage audience and real audience, and Theseus rewards them with a stipend for life. Oberon, Titania, Puck, and the fairies arrive to extend a blessing to these marriages, and then Puck asks us to extend our blessing of applause to all the actors.

## THE COURT



**Geoff Davin  
(Theseus/Oberon)**  
Duke of Athens,  
former soldier, pre-  
sent lover engaged  
to Hippolyta/King of  
the Fairies



**Tamiko Robinson  
Steele (Hippolyta/  
Titania)**  
Queen of the Ama-  
zons, betrothed to  
Theseus/Queen of  
the Fairies



**Denice Hicks  
(Egeus/Puck)**  
Mother to Hermia/  
Oberon's right-  
hand, mischievous  
fairy



**Matthew Beneson  
(Philostrate)**  
Master of the Rev-  
els: to Theseus,  
Nashville and the  
Fairy World



**Joy Greenawalt-  
Lay (Hermia)**  
Daughter to Egeus, in  
love with  
Lysander



**Sam Kell  
(Lysander)**  
A young Athenian  
lover, in love with  
Hermia



**Sarah Jackson-  
Zanotti (Helena)**  
A young noble-  
woman of Athens,  
in love with Deme-  
trius



**Aaron Johnson  
(Demetrius)**  
A young Athenian  
politician in train-  
ing, in love with  
Hermia

## THE MECHANICALS



**Katie Bruno  
(Quince)**  
A carpenter  
and amateur  
director



**Elijah McNutt  
(Snout)**  
A Tinker and  
theater enthu-  
siast (Wall)



**Sam Douglas  
(Bottom)**  
A weaver and  
amateur actor  
(Pyramus)



**Storm Sloan (Snug)**  
A joiner and actor  
(Lion)

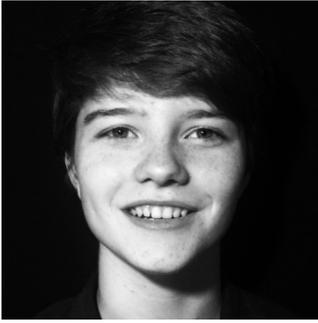


**Seraphim  
Sherman  
(Flute)**  
Bellows-mender  
and reluctant  
actor (Thisby)



**Merrie Shearer  
(Starveling)**  
A tailor suffering  
from stage fright  
(Moonshine)

# THE FAIRIES



**Dakota Collins**  
**(Wolf's Bane)**  
One of Oberon's  
fairies



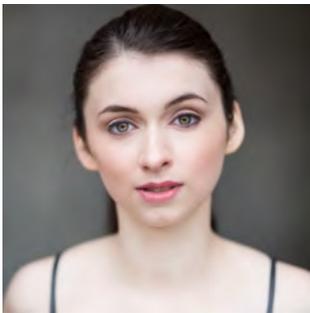
**Abbey Rhyne**  
**(Cobweb)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies



**Josie Clo**  
**(Heliotrope)**  
One of Oberon's  
fairies



**Alexa Pulley**  
**(Willow)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies



**Laura Carpenter**  
**(Mustardseed)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies



**Katie Chance**  
**(Peaseblossom)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies



**Bella**  
**Higganbotham**  
**(Poppy)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies



**Christopher**  
**McNane**  
**(Sun)**  
One of Tita-  
nia's fairies



**Rachel Wooley**  
**(Mote)**  
One of Titania's  
fairies

## SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE—A BRIEF TIMELINE:

1558 Queen Elizabeth ascends to the throne

1564 April 23, birth of William Shakespeare, in Stratford-upon-Avon

1572-76 Formation of Theater companies in London and building of The Theater by James Burbage, the first free-standing commercial theatre.

1582 Marriage of Anne Hathaway and William Shakespeare

1583 Susanna Shakespeare born

1585 Twins Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare born

1586-88 (?) Sometime in the late 1580s, most likely, Shakespeare leaves Stratford-upon-Avon for London, perhaps with a company of players

1590 Shakespeare appears to be writing plays by this time. Early plays include *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, 3*.

1592 Plague closes London theaters; Shakespeare turns to writing verse

1594-98 Four years of heavy rains in England; Titania's speech in 2.i may be referring to this period of bad weather.

1595-96 Likely date of staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* likely written and staged about the same time.

1598-99 The Burbages, Shakespeare and others finance the building of the Globe theater on the south bank of the Thames, just outside the city of London. *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, and *As You Like It* may have been among the Plays to open the Globe Theatre.

1603 Queen Elizabeth dies; James the VI of Scotland ascends the throne of England and becomes James I of England. James becomes the patron of Shakespeare's theater company (now known as "The King's Men")

1605-06 *King Lear* likely written; first record of court performance is Christmas

1606 *Macbeth* likely written; perhaps written almost the same time as *King Lear*

1612-14 Shakespeare "retires" to Stratford,; however he continues to collaborate with others writing plays

1616 April 23, Shakespeare dies and is buried at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon

1623 First Folio—a collected "coffee table" edition of 37 plays—published by Shakespeare's fellow actors, John Hemings and William Condell

Useful Resources on Shakespeare's biography:

**Bate, Jonathon. *Soul of Age; A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*. New York: Random House, 2010.**

**Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: Norton, 2004.**

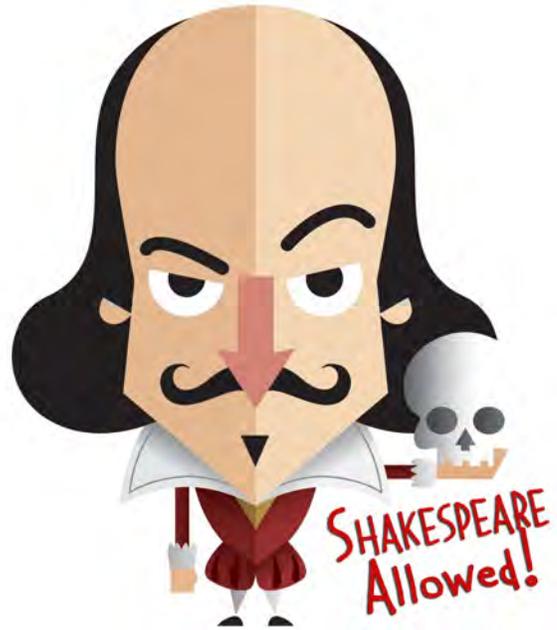
**Schoenbaum, Samuel. *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.**

**Folger Shakespeare Library Website: <http://folger.edu/shakespeares-life>**

**Shakespeare Birthplace Trust: <http://shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/education/teaching-resources/>**

### 1. Nashville Shakespeare Festival's Shakespeare Allowed! Format:

Often a simple exercise of reading key scenes aloud can make Shakespeare's words meaningful. The Nashville Shakespeare Festival sponsors a Shakespeare Aloud round table read of a play the first Saturday of each month and the main Nashville Public Library. In this format, everyone at the table (or in a desk in a classroom) reads in sequence, rather than taking roles. Everyone participates and gets to try his or her hand at reading the text.



Teachers may emphasize that the effort is primary. Teachers can select a scene or short segment to read aloud as an exercise to lay the groundwork for a class discussion or other class activity.

### 2. Staged Readings model:

Students with limited exposure to or experience with theater can benefit from an effort to read a scene or segment of a play aloud, using basic blocking (movement on stage) and interaction among characters. Students select a scene or part of a scene (around 50 lines). Working together with classmates, they choose a few simple movements to dramatize the action. The goal is for the students to make sense of the language and envision how the story may be shown on stage. Rehearsal time should be short (15 or 20 minutes) and should only take one class period to complete.

One effective strategy is to have two groups stage the same scene, and invite the class to watch and reflect upon the differences in each group's presentation.

### 3. Creating multi-voice readings of poetry and passages:

Help students to recognize shifts in tone or poetic diction by working in small groups. Start with a sonnet (divided into quatrains: 4 lines, with rhyme, ending in a couplet, 4-4-4-2). Students can interpret and decide appropriate pace, inflection, emphasis and tone. Ask students to choose the best platform to share this poetry (perhaps with musical inspiration: jazz, pop, rap, country) and help them use their voices to convey meaning.

## A Conversation with Rollie Mains, Midsummer's Music Director and Composer...

What STYLES or musical GENRES influenced your compositions for Midsummer?

**“Jackie and I talked at length about her vision for the production, and she wanted to “locate” the show in Greece. Because the show has two distinct settings: “Reality” which is Modern Greece or the time and place of Theseus and Hippolyta, and the “Fairy World” which is the ancient (or primeval) setting for Oberon and Titania. The first order of business was to identify what makes something specifically Greek.**

**Musical color helps to unify the setting for the audience, it can become Modern or ancient or a mix of both!**

How did you use Greece for musical inspiration?

**“Our director, Jackie, found a particular dance that she liked for the opening scene called a “Zeimbekiko”.**

**It is a Greek dance that used to be a war dance and was later used in weddings. It has a tango-esque feel. I've adapted an actual Zeimbekiko dance to underscore the first scene.**

Are there specific COMPOSERS or MUSICIANS that you feel significantly impacted your vision for this production?

***“There are too many composers to mention! Even if it’s “Greek” music. There is a wildly complicated balance in creating music that is interesting and sophisticated but is utilitarian and recognizes the parameters that the production dictates. From Stravinsky to John Williams, Mahler to Danny Elfman, Leonard Bernstein to Elmer Bernstein...They’ve all managed to tread that delicate line. I think of them often as I work, not as material sources, but the inspiration to keep working and keep tweaking until it’s right. The work is never finished, of course...which is why live theater is so fun. Each night is different and presents new ideas and challenges. It’s a musicians dream to do this.”***

Check out these examples of the Zeimbekiko dance and music!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9W6CTeJI-0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWrgOunm0sg>

## Instruments you'll hear and see in A Midsummer Night's Dream...

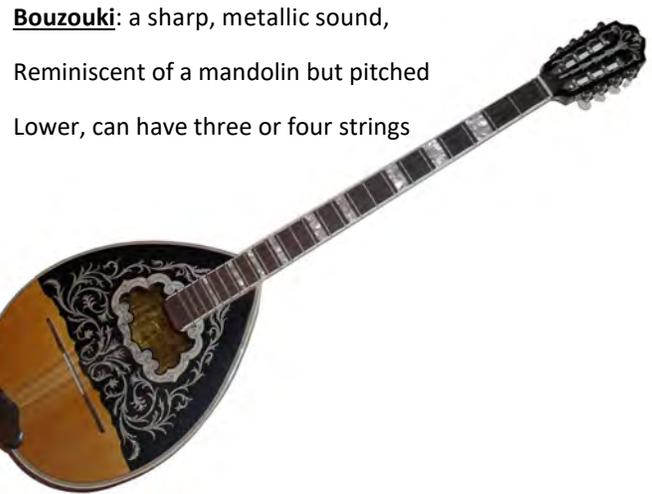
"I knew that I would need some versatile players

to get as many colors as possible. So the bouzouki player (local musician Jeff Rogers) can also play mandolin and guitar.

The next color that I identified was an accordion/reedy instrument. So I'll be playing melodica and accordion. Those two instruments, the bouzouki/mandolin and accordion/melodica can play both melody and harmony, so the next step was to fill out the ensemble with the third player playing some kind of shawm/pipe instrument.

Natalie Bell will be playing oboe (a chromatic shawm...double reed instrument) and pipe/flute.

And finally, since there was some dance in the show (and a battle scene), I needed drums. Matthew Beneson (Philostrate) will be playing something called a frame drum which is an ancient drum that has a skin stretched over a hoop. He will also be playing other percussion as needed. We will also have a bass drum mounted into the set which will give us some of the low end frequencies we are missing in the other instruments.  
—Rollie Mains



**Bouzouki:** a sharp, metallic sound,  
Reminiscent of a mandolin but pitched  
Lower, can have three or four strings

**Melodica:** Small, handheld keyboard that produces sound when musician blows into mouth-piece



Frame Drum



Accordion

## Lesson in Poetic Meter by Jayme M. Yeo, Ph.D.

Shakespeare often wrote in iambic pentameter, but how does this poetic meter contribute to the meaning of the play? In this class activity, students learn to recognize how different kinds of lines create meaning for the characters of a play. They explore how shared lines create shared meaning between characters. Shared lines between two lovers give the impression that they are finishing each other's sentences, while shared lines between enemies can sound like they are contradicting each other in a heated argument. Students also learn how long lines are often used when a character is confused or overwhelmed.

Note that not all lines are in poetic meter. The “rude mechanicals” (the working-class Athenians led by Peter Quince), for instance, speak mostly in prose.

**Time:** Approx. 15-30 minutes, depending on level of familiarity with the text.

**Text:** The lover's quarrel, Act 3, scene 2, lines 283-313 (Folger Digital Texts online)

### Activity:

1. Choose three volunteers, or ask students to read the passages aloud in groups of three without any advanced instruction. The purpose is simply to get a feel for the lines without worrying about meter.
2. Explain iambic pentameter to the students. Iambic pentameter consists of ten syllables total: five “iamb” or poetic “feet” of two syllables each—one short, unstressed syllable and one long, stressed syllable. It is common to compare the rhythm of iambic pentameter to a heartbeat. Have students tap the rhythm out on their chests, and/or speak a couple of lines from the text that run in perfect meter, such as the first two lines of Hermia's speech.
3. Explain “shared” lines (sometimes called “split” lines), in which two actors share the rhythm of a single line. In some texts, shared lines can be identified because the line is “split” on the page between two characters, like these two lines between Hermia and Lysander:

HERMIA: In earnest, shall I say?

LYSANDER: Ay, by my life,

Shared lines indicate that the actors should “pick up” each other's rhythm and can sometimes contain shared meanings—either agreement or contradiction. They are used often in fighting and love scenes. Ask students to identify the shared lines in the passage below, and to discuss why the lines might be shared in this quarrel. Have them read it out in small groups, being sure to keep the rhythm so there are no pauses between speakers.

4. Explain “long” lines. These are lines with six iambs (iambic hexameter), or lines with an extra syllable at the end, known as “feminine endings.” These lines can feel like a mouthful, and are often spoken by characters when they are confused or when the idea in the line is particularly important. Ask students to identify the long lines in Hermia's speech, such as line 285: “Am I not Hermia? Are not you Lysander?” Ask students to discuss what ideas in the long lines might be particularly difficult for Hermia to express. Ask them to read Hermia's speech to each other in its entirety. Do the same for Hermia's last speech.

5. Have students read the passage one more time in small groups, then discuss how knowing the meter helps them understand the passage better.

*A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (FOLGER DIGITAL TEXTS)*  
ACT 3, SCENE 2, LINES 283-313

HERMIA

What, can you do me greater harm than hate?  
Hate me? Wherefore? O me, what news, my love?  
Am not I Hermia? Are not you Lysander?  
I am as fair now as I was erewhile.  
Since night you loved me; yet since night you left me.  
Why, then, you left me—O, the gods forbid!—  
In earnest, shall I say?

LYSANDER                    Ay, by my life,  
And never did desire to see thee more.  
Therefore be out of hope, of question, of doubt.  
Be certain, nothing truer, 'tis no jest  
That I do hate thee and love Helena.  
*(Hermia turns him loose.)*

HERMIA  
O me! *(To Helena.)* You juggler, you cankerblossom,  
You thief of love! What, have you come by night  
And stol'n my love's heart from him?

HELENA                    Fine, i' faith.  
Have you no modesty, no maiden shame,  
No touch of bashfulness? What, will you tear  
Impatient answers from my gentle tongue?  
Fie, fie, you counterfeit, you puppet, you!

HERMIA  
"Puppet"? Why so? Ay, that way goes the game.  
Now I perceive that she hath made compare  
Between our statures; she hath urged her height,  
And with her personage, her tall personage,  
Her height, forsooth, she hath prevailed with him.  
And are you grown so high in his esteem  
Because I am so dwarfish and so low?  
How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak!  
How low am I? I am not yet so low  
But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes.

## The Genre of Comedy

### 1. Romantic, or “barrier” comedy

Shakespeare launched his career by writing in three dramatic genres: comedy, history, and tragedy. Of these three, comedy may have been the most familiar to him, because comedies by the Roman playwrights Plautus (264-184 BCE) and Terence (@195-159 BCE) were standard reading in Latin in English grammar schools of Shakespeare’s day. Indeed, *The Comedy of Errors*, among Shakespeare’s early comedies, if not his first, is a loose adaptation of a play by Plautus, *The Menaechmi*. Roman comedy developed its humor from plot lines about young men thwarted in their courting of young women by a “heavy” father. These young men succeed because of the assistance of a witty and clever servant, usually the smartest person in the play. Shakespeare used this basic Roman comedy plot in many of his comedies: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* all feature a father (or father’s will, as in *Merchant*) blocking the will of the young lovers. However, Shakespeare quickly develops a more sophisticated comic plot, substituting the temperaments and wills of the young lovers for the “heavy father.” The Demetrius / Helena plot features this psychological barrier. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*, we see cases of internal barriers (Beatrice and Benedick just can’t stand each other, initially; Rosalind has a few things to teach Orlando before revealing her identity; Olivia’s mourning sustains her resistance to love until it is pierced by the gender-crossing disguise of Viola/Cesario). Shakespeare does retain the witty servant, or a version thereof—the Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors*, the fools Touchstone and Feste in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—as a centerpiece of the comic action and spirit. Most often in Roman comedy, the young male lover pursues and achieves his desire; a major change in Shakespeare’s comedies is the empowerment of women. In most of his comedies, the young women seek and achieve the lovers they desire.

### 2. “Festive” comedy

While Shakespeare may have drawn on Roman comedy for plot structures, he also incorporates elements of other comic forms in his plays. The oldest form of western dramatic comedy is called (perhaps logically), “Old Comedy,” represented by the comedy of Aristophanes that develops social and political commentary through imaginative plots and often farcical stage action. The disruptive comedy and commentary of Shakespeare’s fools echoes this kind of comedy, as does Falstaff in the Henry IV plays. This kind of comedy is akin to forms of humor growing out of folk customs, especially the inversions of place and status common to the Roman saturnalia (wintertime festival) and the medieval Feast of Fools; this kind of comedy is often identified as “saturnalian,” or “festive.” In these times of license, the desires of the body are given free reign, identity is subject to change, the rule of order is suspended, and speech is free. Often in Shakespeare this saturnalia or festivity takes place in a green world, as is the case with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*. In these plays, festive disorder and release within a natural setting allows for new experiences not common to the “city” world and that can lead to clarity of identity, true love, and new insights into social order or philosophical ideas.

### 3. Satiric comedy

Comedy is often satiric, or laced with commentary on social or political ideas. Shakespeare's plays are no exception. The fools, often the centerpiece of festive comedy, are often also the voices of satire. Feste provides a critique of Malvolio's puritanism in *Twelfth Night*; Touchstone mocks Jacques' melancholy in *As You Like It*. The voice of satire is not limited to the fool; Beatrice in *Much Ado* and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* provide critiques of the patriarchal structures they are compelled to live within. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the satiric strain of comedy is less apparent, though we hear touches of it in comments like Puck's about the mixed-up young lovers: "Lord, what fools these mortals be." Likewise, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play within the play, satirizes some elements of theater and perhaps even Shakespeare's greatest play to date, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare's comedies are often described as more romantic (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*) or more satiric (*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*), depending upon the plot emphasis and the overall tone of the play. Indeed, some comedies are defined as "problem plays," because the anti-comic elements can easily overwhelm the happy ending; *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* are three in this "problem" category, though all three are listed as "Comedies" in the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays.

### 4. Comedy on the brink of tragedy

Though many of Shakespeare's comedies are written in the first decade of his career, the 1590s, he returns to comic forms and themes towards the end of his career, with the plays now often labeled "romances": *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Likewise, some of his tragedies are essentially comic plots that go awry: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* are both plays with external barriers to the romance of the main characters. Instead of thwarting those barriers, these plays show how quickly a promise of a comic happy ending can be overturned by chance, fate, the clumsy efforts of well-meaning adults, or the evil of a subordinate. Even Shakespeare's happiest comedies teeter on the brink of tragedy: Hero's shaming and "death" in *Much Ado*, the violence threatened against Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*, the shipwreck in *Twelfth Night*, the abuse of Kate in *Shrew*, the suit of Shylock and its resulting humiliation of him in *Merchant*, the near rape in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and the sad tale of Egeon and the loss of his family that opens *The Comedy of Errors*. Even *A Midsummer Night's Dream* considers the potential for tragedy as an outcome of young love in *Pyramus and Thisbe*. It is as if now that all the lovers have come safely through the wild night in the woods, they can look back, and laugh (because of the mechanicals' production) at what might have gone wrong, even for them. As Lysander and Hermia say: "The course of true love never did run smooth," and "So quick bright things come to confusion" (1.1.136, 151).

Both Shakespearean comedy and tragedy take audiences through periods of chaos to some clarity of the social or political order and personal identity. Comedy invites us into a world where the threats inside the chaos are ultimately humane, rather than destructive. Comedy invites us to recognize our human folly, especially as it pertains to our claims to know our social state or identity. "Lord what fools these mortals be," says Puck, and that line could be applied to just about all Shakespeare's comedies. By laughing at our shared folly, Shakespeare levels the ground we stand on to a human one, not a hierarchical one—and that may be one reason his jokes and stories have never grown old.

**For more reading on the genre of comedy, see:**

Bakhtin, Michael. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 1968; 1984.

Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1972.

Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1957.

Weitz, Eric. *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2009.

### **CLASSROOM ACTIVITY**

How many types of comedy can you identify in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

If you are able to attend the production of *A Midsummer Night's dream*, contrast the comedy of this play with a contemporary comedy, either a film or a television sitcom. How does the comedy between the four young lovers resemble, or not, contemporary "rom com"? What did you laugh at in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Is this like or unlike what you laugh at in a contemporary comedy?

This website from the British Library provides a fine overview of Shakespeare's comedy. Students can apply the concepts explained here to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-shakespeares-comedy>

**The Lovers: Sam Kell, Joy Greenawalt-Lay, Aaron Johnson and Sarah Jackson**



## Setting and Set Design: Imagining Athens and the Woods

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* does truly have a dream setting. Even though the play begins and ends in Athens, an identifiable city, even the world of Athens is not defined as a particular place. It makes sense as the home of Theseus and Hippolyta, figures drawn from Greek mythology, but given that at the end the wedding party watches a play staged in a manner more recognizable to 16<sup>th</sup> century Londoners than ancient Greeks, it is clear that Athens does not have to be an ancient Greek city for the play to work.

The woods, likewise, is a mix of a fantasy world, an English woods that Shakespeare's audience would recognize, and pastoral drawn from classical and Renaissance traditions. It is fantasy, folk, and sophisticated literary art at the same time. Pastoral literature places nature as an ideal in opposition to a corrupt or at least difficult real world. When people escape to the pastoral world, or "green world," they may have experiences that leave them ultimately better off—nature is a way to revitalize, and sometimes revise, the "regular" world.

The English world is evident in figures like Puck, aka "Robin Goodfellow," a name from English folklore, and the fairies like "Moth," "Peaseblossom," and "Cobweb" whose names echo real details of the countryside. When Theseus and Hippolyta discover the four lovers asleep in the woods, Theseus suggests that they came to the woods "to observe / The rite of May" (4.i.131-32), an allusion to an English folk tradition of May games and celebrations.

This is a woods at night, a nocturnal green world, and the fantasy is enhanced by the constant references to the "moon." Shakespeare brings the moon in with ease in the middle acts—this is a theatrical feat that Shakespeare accomplishes through his poetic language. It is the aspect of staging Pyramus and Thisbe that most frustrates the "mechanicals": "Find out moonshine" is Bottom's cry (3.i.47). The night is both mysterious and threatening; when Lysander abandons Hermia to pursue Helena, he leaves her to wake up alone in the woods, and to "swoon with fear" (2.2.158).

**Directors and set designers have had great fun creating Athens and the woods.**

**Some notable productions include the following:**

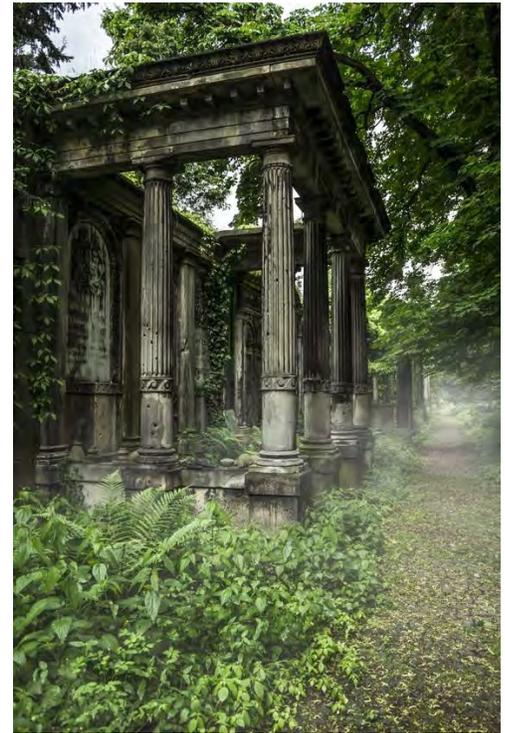
Henry Beerbohm Tree's 1911 London production spared no detail—to the point of having live rabbits on stage to enhance the realism of the woods.

Peter Brook went the opposite direction in a 1970 Royal Shakespeare Festival production, using a white box for a set and having the characters occasionally take to trapezes and other circus props during the action.

A 1981 Royal Shakespeare Festival production, staged shortly after the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, featured Theseus and Hippolyta in costumes reproducing attire worn by Charles and Diana.

The 1999 film, directed by Michael Hoffman and starring Kevin Kline as Bottom, set the play in late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy, with new inventions like the bicycle and phonograph fascinating the fairies.

**Paul Gatrell** (Professor of Theater, Belmont University), set designer for this 2018 Nashville Shakespeare Festival production, echoes architectural features of the nearby Parthenon in the set, thus evoking the historical Athens. The columns and pediment are covered in vines and ivy, not only making for a flexible staging (in a theater that does not allow for set changes!) but also suggesting the way the world of Athens transforms into the world of the Woods.





*Pictured: Set and actors from NSF's 2013 Production of A Midsummer Night's Dream directed by Denice Hicks. This production was set in present day 2013. Athens was represented as "Old Nashville," like Belle Meade, fairies in "New Nashville," like the East side, and the Mechanicals everywhere in between, like the working class and tourists that abound.*

### **Class Activities:**

Creating a setting and set for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not only a creative activity, but it asks students to think about the power and meaning of each place. Designing sets or proposing settings can enable the students to consider symbolic as well as realistic qualities of each world.

Students may want to research and compare various stagings of this play. Emory University's online archive of postcards of productions, *Shakespeare and the Players*, is a good place to begin for historical productions:

<https://shakespeare.emory.edu/>

The Folger Shakespeare Library has webpages devoted to productions, including *MND*:

[https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/view/search?search=SUBMIT&q=midsummer+night%27s+dream&dateRangeStart=&dateRangeEnd=&sort=call\\_number%2Cmpsortorder1%2Ccd\\_title%2Cimprint&QuickSearchA=QuickSearchA](https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/view/search?search=SUBMIT&q=midsummer+night%27s+dream&dateRangeStart=&dateRangeEnd=&sort=call_number%2Cmpsortorder1%2Ccd_title%2Cimprint&QuickSearchA=QuickSearchA)

Shakespeare creates his woods through language. Students can identify speeches that help create the power and mystery of the woods. One way to begin is by noting how often the moon and moonlight are evoked. The online concordance to Shakespeare makes it possible for students to find all the references easily and focus their attention on how language creates the woods. How would you bring moonshine on stage?

<https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/>

## Characters and Character Groups

Shakespeare populates *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a wide range of characters: mythology (Theseus and Hippolyta) meets urban craftsman (Bottom, Snout, Starveling and crew) meets English folklore (Puck) meets aristocratic Renaissance lovers (Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius). The distinct character groupings make an easy and efficient way into the play; comparing and contrasting their actions, language, social status, and perspectives on art and love enable students to gain insight into the play's key themes and actions. However, after considering each group's distinctions, it is important to consider overlaps and connections: how does each group understand love? Are gender roles clearly defined? How are the Athenian and Fairy characters parallel? Or different?

### The Athenians: Theseus and Hippolyta

The opening scene enables Theseus and Hippolyta to establish the overarching time frame of four days until their marriage. This enables the audience to anticipate a happy conclusion (which may help when the chaos of the Woods seems impossible to unravel!).

Theseus is drawn from Greek mythology, Ovid, Plutarch, and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. In all of these, he is generally portrayed as the judicious ruler and the confident aristocrat. However, he is not simply a bland backdrop to the more interesting Hippolyta or the other characters. He is the major power figure in the play, and thus his attitudes and choices will be the ones implemented. Yet . . . he changes his mind about the matches for the lovers and he may be outdone on imagination by Bottom.

Hippolyta is identified as an "Amazon," a figure bequeathed to Shakespeare through Greek and Roman legend. The legends may have some root in history; women appear to have been active fighters in cultures in Central Asia from ancient times. Greeks making forays into south central Asia encountered stories of "Amezan," a valiant female warrior, and the transposition of her name is likely how the Greeks, and now we, have "Amazon" (not only for the women warriors, but for the world's longest river and the world's largest company—students may enjoy seeking out the history of this word!). Thus, Hippolyta is Theseus's equal, but defeated in battle.

#### **A useful book for background about the Amazons:**

Mayor, Adrienne. *The Amazons: Lives & Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World*. Princeton UP, 2014.

#### **Class activity:**

The opening dialogue between Theseus and Hippolyta in 1.i.1-20 is short enough for multiple staged readings within a single class session. Students can try out different expressions of the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta—still tense? Harmonious? A triumphant Theseus and subdued Hippolyta? Or a still combative Hippolyta and an appeasing Theseus??

## **The Athenians: The Lovers**

One of the clichés about the lovers is that audience members can't tell them apart! Like Puck, who mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, at times in the play they all look alike to us. Yet each of the lovers sees someone distinct and unique in the beloved. Hermia cannot "fit [her] fancies to [her] father's will" (1.i.120), because for her, it is impossible "To choose love by another's eyes" (1.i.142). Thus, we have here the conflict between aristocratic marriage to secure property or other benefits of status and companionate marriage to secure a foundation in mutual love for family and future children. This tension was alive in the England of Shakespeare's day, as are family tensions in our own day around choices of mates.

While on one level the fun of the play is the folly and madness allowed to those in love even without the help of fairy juice, on another level, the time in the Woods allows the lovers to experience the range of emotions and psychological states associated with intimacy: fear of abandonment and betrayal, changing relationships with friends, doubts about appearance and attractiveness, questions about identity. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can undergo these traumas with the lovers in a comic mode, enabling us to recognize their reality without ultimately suffering their ravages.

### **Class activities:**

Consider Hermia and Helena as Best Friends: Students can find speeches that characterize each and consider how the challenges of shifting intimacies from friends to mates are shown in the play. Key passages to consider for staged readings:

1.i.183-254

3.ii.178-357

How would you characterize Hermia and Helena? Who would you cast in each role?

Lysander and Demetrius are often portrayed as exemplifying conventional masculine roles: assertive, ready to fight, not sure about the "dream" experience. How would you characterize each of them? Who would you cast in each role? Key passages to consider for staged readings include 3.ii.178-357, as above, and 3.ii.410-455.

## **The "Mechanicals"**

This group is also from Athens, but from a different social rank than that of the aristocrats, whom we have met first in the play. While at first, we may respond with laughs at what may be satire on the ignorance of this group with pretensions of being able to stage a play worthy of Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage, we may also find ourselves quickly responding with affection and pleasure to these characters.

That they are “working class” is indicated immediately by their titles: Bottom the Weaver, Snout the tinker, Starveling the Tailor, Snug the joiner. Each of these names is appropriate to the craft practiced; students may enjoy looking up the names or using this guide from Carnegie Mellon University to links between the names and crafts:

<https://amidsummerscasebook.wordpress.com/2010/09/26/whats-in-a-name/>

While we may laugh at the lack of theatrical sophistication in this group, this company does call attention to all the challenges and tricks of theater, many of which are being used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: bringing in moonshine, roaring lions, deaths on stage, building walls. Thus, this group takes us into the mystery and magic of theater.

If we compare the social status of these players with Shakespeare's own peers, we will see a remarkable similarity:

Shakespeare: son of a (prosperous, mostly) tanner

Ben Jonson: son of a bricklayer

Christopher Marlowe: son of a shoemaker

James Burbage (theater entrepreneur, builder of first London theater): apprentice joiner

Edward Alleyn (leading actor): son of an innkeeper

Indeed, Peter Quince and Bottom's company is no more or less “literate” than Shakespeare's peers! These workers were increasing in literacy in the 1570s and 1580s in London as schooling was gradually expanded (see David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (1980)), and thus we may see a group experimenting with its newly achieved abilities to read, to be “literate.” Thus, they are both ambitious for the theater, yet not sure how it all works. **How do you create special effects when all you have is a bare stage (minimal scenery at this time!), you have is a bare stage (minimal scenery at this time!), your body, your voice, and a script?**

### **Class Activities**

All the scenes involving the “mechanicals” make great opportunities for staged readings, and even students hesitant to participate may find comfort in the apprehensions expressed by this group about performing on stage. 1.2 and 3.1 are the main scenes.

While it is possible to have this group represent its early modern London artisans, this is also a group often reconceived as a “local” group, or as having a distinct group identity. Students might consider other identities for this group. In the 2013 production at the Globe Theater in London, the company had a distinctive tap dance they used to signal each other.

## The Fairies and Oberon and Titania

These characters give the play its magical bent, its dream quality. They are “spirits of another sort.” As noted earlier, this group mixes figures from local, English folklore, as Robin Goodfellow (Puck), and from Greek mythology, as Oberon and Titania. The Fairy World brings music and dance into the play, as well as the floral landscape of the English countryside (“a bank where the wild thyme blows / Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows” (2.i. 254-55)).

Sometimes, the fairies are dismissed with language like Hippolyta uses with the players: “this is the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (5.1.213). However, Shakespeare creates them as far more than window-dressing for the lovers’ plots. Shakespeare uses the fairies to suggest the power of transformation, of realms of existence and experience beyond our everyday, workaday lives.

Do you believe in fairies? Do you have to believe in fairies to engage with the play? Creating the fairy-land and the characters that populate it is one of a director’s greatest challenges.

One convention of staging is that the actors who play Theseus and Hippolyta double as Oberon and Titania. This doubling brings up many interesting questions about psychological connections, overlaps in plot, and parallels and contrasts in characterization between these two pairs of royal couples. Students may enjoy discussing the pros and cons of doubling these roles. The conflict between Oberon and Titania is over a “little changeling boy,” who is the son of a lady-in-waiting to Titania. This relationship is portrayed beautifully by Titania—“Full often hath she gossiped by my side / And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands” (2.i.127-28)—a line about a female friendship that Helena will echo when recalling how she and Hermia were like “Two lovely berries moulded on one stem” (3.ii.212). Is Oberon carrying out a need to divide, an expression of a masculine need to possess, or is this quarrel a matter of competition, two of equal power frequently at odds?

One other key event in the fairy world is the “translation” of Bottom with the ass’s head placed on him by Puck. In this “disguise,” he becomes the beloved of Titania, who has had fairy juice spread on her eyes. The scenes of their courtship are wildly funny, but also reveal wonderful facets of the Fairy World. Bottom sees each of Titania’s fairies through the lens of the everyday (“Good Master Mustardseed . . . that same cowardly, giant-like, ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house” (3.i. 181)). Titania shows that “love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,” as Helena had said earlier (1.i.237) as she proclaims Bottom “as wise as thou art beautiful” (3.i.135). This liaison between a fairy queen and a lowly weaver may be the most extreme event in the forest, but it transforms each of them—especially Bottom. Perhaps those of us willing to be foolish can also be granted the most lovely of visions.

### **Class activities:**

Much of the fairy world, the Woods, is created through language. Students might select a longer passage or a short dialogue to complete as a staged reading or annotate for the literary elements.

The following make good choices:

Puck: "I am that merry wanderer of the night" (2.i.44-58)

Titania: "These are the forgeries of jealousy" (2.i.82-118) [an explanation for global warming?]

Oberon: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows" (2.i.254-272); "But we are spirits of another sort" (3.ii.401-408)

How would you transform yourself into an inhabitant of the fairy world, of the Woods outside Athens? This activity involves beginning with your body in your "everyday, average" posture. Using a speech of one of the fairies or even a name ("Mustardseed," "Cobweb") for clues about a fairy image, slowly move your posture and pose into one that conveys a fairy being. Try this transformation exercise two or three times, then reflect on what you learn through your body about this transformation from human to fairy. Have students work in groups so that a fairy community is created. How can the physical transformations signal a new, mysterious kind of experience created in the play? Students can journal individually or discuss as a group what these exercises of physical transformation enable them to understand about themselves, about acting, and about this play.

## **"Pyramus and Thisbe": The Play-Within-the-Play**

One of the highlights, if not the highlight, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the play presented by Bottom, Quince, and company at the end to celebrate the three weddings. It is good enough to "ease the torturing of an anguished hour," which is what Theseus suggests a play should do (5.i.38), and though its text would not promise illuminating theater, its performance achieves far more.

The plot of this play is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a favorite classical book of Shakespeare's in the English translation by Arthur Golding (1567, 1575). However, the language and theatrical style of its title is an echo of English plays of the 1560s and 1570s, the decades just before and at the beginning of the public stage. It is possible to find plays with titles similar to the full title of "Pyramus and Thisbe" and written in the "eight and six" or "eight and eight" specified by Bottom.

Here is an example from the opening lines spoken by the main character, Cambises, in the play of the same name by Thomas Preston, 1569: *A lamentable tragedy mixed ful of pleasant mirth, conteyning the life of CAMBISES King of PERCIA*:

My council grave and sapient,  
    With lords of legal train  
Attentive ears towards bend  
    And mark what shall be sain.  
So you likewise, my valiant knight,  
    Whose manly acts doth fly,  
By brute of fame the sounding trump  
    Doth pierce the azure sky.

This play of “Pyramus and Thisbe” sounded old fashioned to Shakespeare’s audience—it sounded like *Cambises*, a play 25 years old—as Shakespeare often sounds to us today; it uses an older language and antique concepts of staging. So its style is a source of the laughter it generates, as is what we would consider overacting by the play troupe. It makes farce of the recent theater history for Shakespeare’s age, much as our age ridicules 1980s or 1960s styles. Remember, “Pyramus and Thisbe” is Shakespeare’s language as much as is the best poetry from the earlier scenes in the play—Shakespeare was capable of a magnificent range of poetic and theatrical effects.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe resembles *Romeo and Juliet* in striking ways: a love forbidden by parents, a meeting at a wall by moonlight (Juliet’s balcony?), a plan to elope, and the disastrous results. Was Shakespeare a confident enough playwright to mock his greatest hit to date? Internal evidence suggests *Romeo and Juliet* was written about the same time. Even though in performance “Pyramus and Thisbe” is funny, students should read at least segments of the play in a serious voice to gain a sense of the tragic undercurrents. Thisbe’s speech to the dead Pyramus can be read “straight,” as a tragic lament:

These lily lips,  
This cherry nose,  
These yellow cowslip cheeks,  
Are gone, are gone!           (5.i.325-28)

Yet, it works as theater. It may rival the triumphs of the play that Shakespeare has written, that encloses it. And it works to conclude the chaotic romances of the play. What Hermia and Lysander had feared, had known as risks of love, happen to Pyramus and Thisbe:

**Lysander:** Or if there were a sympathy in choice,  
War, death or sickness did lay siege to it,  
Making it momentary as a sound,  
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream:  
Brief as the lightning in the collied night . . .  
So quick bright things come to confusion. (1.1.143-51)

Maybe this is what the comic rendering of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe provides for the lovers—some way of keeping tragedy at bay, making it something they, and we, can laugh at, at least at this time of joy at the weddings.

**Class Activity:**

Students not only enjoy staging this play, but they can explore creative directions with the company of players, the language, the theatrical conventions. This play is also a chance to introduce the question of acting and gender; most students will know that in Shakespeare’s day, all the actors were male. Thus, if single-gender or mixed gender class groups produce the play, they can engage in a discussion whether an actor’s gender matters and what might be gained and lost by different combinations of gender among the actors for this play.

Students may also enjoy watching other versions of “Pyramus and Thisbe”; many are on You Tube, including one by the Beatles (yes, John, Paul, George, and Ringo) from the early 1960s.

Watch it [HERE](#).

## Key Themes: Dream and Imagination, Love, Theater

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* links all of these themes at various points in the play. To Puck and Oberon, the lovers' chaos in the forest is like a theater performance, a "fond pageant," to which they are spectators (3.ii.114). To the lovers, this chaos is the ultimate test of love, a very real (as far as they know) time of rejection and betrayal, competition, physical and verbal fighting. But when it is over, they can only remember it as "our dreams" (4.i.201). Bottom vows to create art out of his dream of the romance with the Fairy Queen: "I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called 'Bottom's Dream'" (4.i.214-15). Theseus declares that actors, even the best, always need the audience's "imagination" to "amend them" (5.i.215). These and more thematic links can be explored as a way of interrogating how Shakespeare's "Dream" has impacted us.

### Dream and Imagination

Discussions of the play perhaps should begin with the title, and especially "dream." Do we trust our "dreams"? What is a "dream" state—a form of reality or something entirely different? If a dream, once completed, cannot ever be recapitulated, what does it mean to base our lives in some way, our choices, our beliefs, our decisions, on them? What does that require of us? And the inverse question—what would life be like without dreams?

#### Class Activity:

Bottom and Theseus on dream and imagination.

Bottom's speech upon awakening from the night with Titania, and Theseus's speech when reflecting with Hippolyta on the stories of the lovers, provide excellent texts for exploring the question of dreams and imagination. Here are Bottom and Theseus's speeches side by side:

Bottom:

When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer.

My next is, "most fair Pyramus." Hey ho. Peter Quince? Flute the bellows mender? Snout the tinker? Starveling? God's my life! Stolen hence, and left me asleep? I have had a most rare vision. I had a dream, past the wit of man, to say, what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was -- there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had -- but man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. It shall be called "Bottom's Dream," because it hath no bottom. And I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

(4.i.201-20)

Theseus:

More strange then true. I never may believe  
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.  
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more  
Than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:  
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things  
Unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes,  
And gives to airy nothing a local habitation  
And a name. Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.  
Or, in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear?

(5.i.3-22)

### **Class Activity:**

Students can create staged readings for each of these, emphasizing the lines they think most resonant. They can also write a literary analysis of each or both, considering the rhetorical elements and figurative language in each. Students familiar with biblical literature may recognize the allusion to Paul's letter to the Corinthians in Bottom's speech (1 Corinthians 2: 9-10); students familiar with Plato may recognize the image of the "mad poet" in Plato's dialogue, *Ion*. Does Theseus believe what he says? He is expansive in the first part, but then seems to reduce imagination to supposing a "bush" to be a "bear." Bottom, on the other hand, seems to say there is no language but art for his dream. Theseus has social and political rank; sometimes that is used to validate his statements as the "right" ones about imagination. However, Bottom, lacking in political rank, may nonetheless have more theatrical power than Theseus, thus validating his understanding of the relationship between dream, imagination, and art.

### **Love**

"The course of true love never did run smooth": often, we think that line is from *Romeo and Juliet*, because it describes the action of that play perfectly. However, it is spoken by Lysander in the first scene as he and Hermia are reacting to the feared edict that will prevent them from marrying and force Hermia into a loveless marriage. In *Dream*, two of the strongest speeches on love come from Helena and Hermia. Socially, these two young aristocratic women would be subject to their parents' choices and not assumed to have wills or desires of their own. Or—if they have wills or desires—they should at least politely not speak of them! However, these two characters join a significant list of women in Shakespeare's comedies of the 1590s who express their choice in love and actively pursue it, even at the displeasure and often threats of parents and other voices of authority. And they win! Shakespeare seems to go against the grain of his age in giving young women the right to choose love by their eyes: such is the case for Beatrice in *Much Ado*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, among others. Hermia's short speech, and Helena's longer speech, make effective contrasting statements on love:

**Hermia:**

**So will I grow, so live, so die my lord,  
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up  
Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke  
My soul consents not to give sovereignty.**

**(1.i.81-84)**

**Helena:**

**Things base and vile, holding no quantity,  
Love can transpose to form and dignity.  
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the  
mind,  
And therefore is wingèd Cupid painted blind.  
Nor hath love's mind of any judgment taste:  
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.  
And, therefore, is Love said to be a child,  
Because in choice he is often beguiled.  
As waggish boys in game themselves forswear,  
So the boy Love is perjured everywhere.  
For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,  
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine.  
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,  
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.  
I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight!  
Then, to the wood will he tomorrow night  
Pursue her; and for his intelligence  
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense.  
But herein mean I to enrich my pain,  
To have his sight thither and back again.**

**(1.i.235-55)**

Students can compare Hermia’s radical (for the 1590s) declaration of her independence in love, and her

independent “soul”; the most sacred part of her is not her father’s to dispose of. Notice how this sense of integrity of self is also what she feels is a cornerstone of her love for Lysander. Helena, on the other hand, paints a psychologically realistic portrait of love as involving “pain” and betrayal, yet also as an emotion that “transpose[s]” the beloved.

Hippolyta provides a coda to Theseus’s speech (described above) in which she defines a mutual experience that is more than what language can express:

But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.i.23-27)

Hippolyta seems to suggest that out of the dreams and stories and nighttime has emerged “something of great constancy” that is to be trusted. With Hippolyta’s comment, we are back to love as requiring trust in dreams, in “stor[ies] of the night” and not as a rational, explicable dimension of human experience.

### **Class activity:**

The experience of love should be one students are eager to discuss. Whether doing staged readings, comparing the experience of love in the play with contemporary depictions of love, or whether debating the nature of the lover’s emotions for each other, this play offers a wealth of avenues for debating what this experience is all about.

Students can create scenes that are “backstories” for what we see in the play. What kind of friendship did Helena and Hermia have? What did they text about? Likewise, for Lysander and Demetrius—do they know each other very well before becoming rivals for Hermia? What was Demetrius and Helena’s relationship like? Did Helena know Lysander very well? Students can draft a “text” dialogue, or in other ways develop an account of the history of these pairs.

Students should be encouraged to talk about places the play grates against contemporary experience. Helena’s “spaniel” lines (2.i.206-14) are not ones we could endorse today (and, indeed, are often cut from productions); however, students can have a productive conversation about how to address the dangers of this demeaning self-perspective. Likewise, Titania’s giving up of the changeling boy after Oberon’s fairy juice trick on her may also seem like manipulation. Titania has a stronger sense of self than Helena—is this a temporary truce, or a more permanent submission on her part? Theseus and Hippolyta spar all the way through the play within a play—a way of asserting equality? Or what a marriage of two warriors sounds like?

## Theater

By 1595-96, when this play was written and first staged, Shakespeare had a number of successes under his belt and a promising career ahead of him. He was fully immersed in the theater—actor, playwright, soon-to-be investor—and likely spent his days not in an ivory tower but working with his fellow actors, production crews, and creative types. Though the Globe theater was still four or five years away, his troupe, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, regularly presented plays at the Curtain and the Theatre, in what is today East London. Thus, he has had plenty of time to understand what and how things go right in the theater, and what and how things go wrong. Yet he is willing to send up his own art in a slapstick play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. However, he calculated this failure of a play by all rational standards to be a major theatrical triumph—and maybe he was making the same calculation about his creation, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

The commentary of Theseus, Hippolyta, and the now wedded couples through the course of the play can provide one way of thinking about theater. Students can compare these audience responses to their own, considering how issues of class, attitudes towards imagination, and art influence each speaker’s commentary. Puck’s epilogue makes another good text for exploring theatrical art and its impact—and its fragility. On one level, it is a clever plea for applause; on another, it compares the experience of being in a theater to dreaming:

**Puck:**

**If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream.  
Gentles, do not reprehend.  
If you pardon, we will mend.  
And, as I am an honest Puck,  
If we have unearnèd luck  
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,  
We will make amends ere long.  
Else the Puck a liar call.  
So, good night unto you all.  
Give me your hands, if we be friends,  
And Robin shall restore amends.**



Photo by Rick Malkin

Denice Hicks as Puck and Geoff Davin as Oberon

## **Class Activity:**

Students can explore theater by interacting with any local theater productions. One excellent way to see theater from the inside is to volunteer—the Nashville Shakespeare Festival has a robust volunteer program, and students may be able to get service credit for ushering or volunteering in other ways at the productions.

If the class discussions or informal writing assignments began with students speculating on the meaning and importance they attach to dreams, then the epilogue provides an opportunity to return to that first discussion or writing and explore it more deeply now that the play is completed.

Do students find theater and other arts to be forms of dreams? If so, how?

Visual arts, recorded music, film—these arts can be replayed and the sensations associated with them can be revived. However, live theater can never be “replayed”; every night is always, somehow different.

How does that transitory quality of theatrical art give it value? Students in class who have or who do participate in theater or live performance art of any kind can be invited to share their experiences of the value of live performance. Finally, students might consider the way art provides a dialogue about humanity’s important questions. How does our society value art as a place for this dialogue in comparison to, say, political arenas or educational settings?

## **Additional resources for A Midsummer Night’s Dream**

### **Useful texts:**

Bate, Jonathan, and Eric Rasmussen, eds. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The RSC Shakespeare. Modern Library, 2008.

This edition has wonderful essays on the theatrical tradition and interviews with actors and directors, in addition to scene by scene summaries and clear notes.

Chaudhuri, Sukanta, ed. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The Arden Shakespeare. Bloomsbury, 2018.

This is the scholarly edition, with extensive footnotes, discussions of the quarto and folio texts, and historical and literary background.

The Folger Shakespeare Library provides a free text (no notes) and ample teaching resources:

<https://www.folger.edu/midsummer-nights-dream>

### **Recent major productions and films:**

The Royal Shakespeare Company website includes many production photographs as well as an “Education” section with class activities and background information.

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/a-midsummer-nights-dream/>

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Dir. Michael Hoffman. Starring Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer. 1999.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Dir. Peter Hall. Starring Judi Dench, Diana Rigg, Helen Mirren, Ian Richardson. 1968.

## ABOUT THE NASHVILLE SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

The mission of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival is to educate and entertain the Mid-South community through professional Shakespearean experiences.

The Festival enriches and unifies our community with bold, innovative and relevant productions along with empowering, participatory educational programs, setting the community standard of excellence in educational outreach and performances of Shakespeare's plays.

The Festival stages Shakespeare's plays in the summer at Centennial Park and in January at the Troutt Theater at Belmont University.

The Festival also sponsors numerous workshops, educational outreach programs, and public events.

Please visit our website for specific information: <http://www.nashvilleshakes.org>

## NSF Apprentice/Journeyman Company

The Apprentice Co. training is an intensive for aspiring theatre lovers age 13+ led by the Artistic Director and Education Director, along with guest artists hired from the professional talent in Nashville. *Apprentices receive over 70 hours of performance training in movement, voice and diction, acting, text analysis, and character work, and then perform supporting roles in the Shakespeare in the Park production.*

Auditions for the 2019 Apprentice Company will be announced in February.



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