

## About *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind." These words, spoken by Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, represent this play's major theme. At this point in the play, the young Athenian, Helena, is in love with Demetrius, who is in love with Helena's best friend Hermia. Helena knows she is as beautiful as Hermia, but that Demetrius' love for her friend is not based on beauty, but on how he *thinks* about her. In this fanciful dreamscape, Shakespeare demonstrates how love is a form of enchantment, or "spell." He throws together a delightful cast of characters, ranging from commoners, to dukes and ladies, to the king and queen of fairies. The surreal, supernatural wood in which most of the story takes place brings together all levels of society. Love, in its most blinding form, crosses all lines. Traditional societal distinctions blur or disappear altogether, and the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary. Stereotypical, almost interchangeable lovers Helena, Hermia, Lysander, and Demetrius are transformed to unique individuals under the mysterious powers of love. Helena wisely realizes, "Things base and vile, holding no quantity, love can transpose to form and dignity."

The fairies in this play have great fun playing with the affections of the "mortals" as delightful love mix-ups occur. But the fairy world is not immune to chaos. King of the fairies, Oberon, lets jealousy drive him to place a spell on his own wife, causing her to fall in love with one of the "lowest" characters in the story. This coupling demonstrates how reason has truly been turned on its head, and reveals the tenuous boundary between reality and dreams, reason and insanity.

After order has been restored, the lovers awaken as if from a dream, and no one is the wiser except the sprite Puck, who joyfully mocks the mortals. From his superior perspective, the mortal world appears ridiculous, just as the "actors" appear ridiculous to the aristocrats at the story's end. It is this "play within a play" mirror image that connects each level of the story—the supernatural world, the aristocratic world, and the world of commoners. Outside the wood, these worlds are separated by status and class. But within the wood, these worlds not only combine, but also share common elements. No one is immune to chaos or absurdity.

Much of this play seems dreamlike, and many of its characters as if they are sleepwalking. Though everything ends up as it should, and lovers are successfully matched, no one seems quite sure how it all happened. Ironically, it is Bottom who realizes, "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound on his dream."

# A Midsummer Night's Dream

## Summary

*The story takes place in ancient Athens, a place of tradition, grandeur, and culture. Within its walls lives a duke and duchess, the educated and uneducated, the rich and the poor. It is a place where boundaries of status and class separate its citizens. Outside Athens' walls exists a wood, rich with magic, mystery, and enchantment. Here, boundaries seem vague, and life, surreal, as if one were walking into a dream . . .*

### ✿ ACT ONE ✿

Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, his bride to be, are making plans for their wedding day when Egeus, one of the duke's royal subjects, comes to visit. He is unhappy because his daughter Hermia will not agree to marry Demetrius, the man to whom she is promised. "I have promised my daughter to Demetrius," Egeus tells the duke. "And she refuses to obey my wishes." Hermia tells the duke she can't marry Demetrius because she is in love with another man.

But it doesn't matter. The duke informs Hermia that she has to obey her father's wishes. She has three choices—marry Demetrius, be put to death, or live in a convent as a nun. She has four days to make her decision. Hermia is devastated with the news.

Afterward, Lysander, the man Hermia loves, comes to her with a plan. He and Hermia will secretly steal away the next night and travel through the forest away from Athens. Their journey will take them to another city where they can marry legally.

Helena, Hermia's best friend, is heart-broken over the situation, for she is in love with Demetrius. She wishes she were marrying him instead of Hermia, but Demetrius loves Hermia. Hermia and Lysander tell Helena of their plan to escape the following night, and swear her to secrecy. Unfortunately for Hermia and Lysander, Helena does not keep their secret. She decides to tell Demetrius of their plan, hoping he will be so thankful that he will reject Hermia and love her instead.

Meanwhile, a troupe of part-time actors meet to learn about their next play. Peter Quince, the writer of the play, assigns everyone to a part. The play will be called *The Most Lamentable Comedy, and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby*. Nick Bottom is happy to hear he will be the star of the play, Pyramus. Francis Flute will play the role of Thisby. Flute begs Quince not to make him play a woman, but Quince insists. "You shall wear a mask to hide

your face," Quince tells him. Quince quickly assigns the other roles in the play to the remaining actors. Snug will play the lion; Starveling, Thisby's mother; Snout, Pyramus' father; and himself, Thisby's father. Everyone worries that the "lion" will frighten the ladies in the audience. That would mean a trip to jail or even death for the actors! Nevertheless, rehearsal for the play is scheduled for the following night in the woods, so no one will be able to see the play before the duke and his wedding guests.

## ACT TWO

In the very same woods that night, Puck, a lively sprite, meets with a fairy. This fairy is an attendant to Titania, queen of the fairies. Puck is known throughout the forest as a creator of great mischief among mortals. Many tales have been told of how he causes stools to break under old women as they sit, turns milk sour, and snaps at gossips like a crab. "Be certain Titania does not encounter king Oberon tonight," he tells the fairy. "Oberon is very angry with her." Oberon, king of the fairies, wants a child Titania has taken from an Indian king. The child belonged to a friend of Titania's who died in childbirth. King Oberon thought the child would make an excellent personal attendant, and when Titania refused to give up the child, Oberon became extremely upset.

Soon after, as Puck and the fairy look on, Oberon and Titania meet in the forest clearing. Again Oberon asks Titania for the child, and again she refuses. After Titania leaves with her train, Oberon decides to punish her for her insolence, and devises a plan.

"Find the flower with the juice that makes a person, upon awakening, fall in love with the first living thing seen," he tells Puck. He then sends Puck on a mission to find the flower and bring it back to him.

The moment Puck leaves, Demetrius and Helena stumble into the clearing. Oberon stays behind to watch them. Demetrius is searching for Hermia and Lysander, having heard from Helena that they escaped into the forest that night. Helena persistently follows him. "I do not love you, so stop following me," Demetrius tells her. Helena proclaims she can't live without him. "Very well," Demetrius replies. "I will leave you alone in the woods." He leaves her alone in the darkness, and though Helena tries to follow, she is unable to keep up.

Seeing this, Oberon feels disgusted with Demetrius' behavior and decides to get involved in the lives of these two young Athenians. When Puck returns with the flower, Oberon instructs him to take some of the flower juice and place it on the eyes of a man wearing Athenian clothing. The juice should only be placed on the man's eyes when Puck is sure he will see Helena when he first wakes up, thereby falling in love with her.

Oberon sends Puck on his way, and then goes in search of Titania. He finds Titania asleep on a bed of flowers. He carefully squeezes some of the flower juice on her eyelids, and then disappears.

Meanwhile, Lysander and Hermia have become lost in the woods. They decide to rest and continue their journey in the morning. Puck comes upon the two sleeping Athenians, and places the flower juice on the Lysander's eyelids, mistaking him for Demetrius. Both men are wearing Athenian clothing, so Puck is none the wiser.

In another part of the woods, Hermia tires of trying to keep up with Demetrius and decides to try and find her way home. Suddenly, she comes upon the sleeping Lysander and Hermia. Helena wakes Lysander, and since she is the first living thing he lays eyes on, he falls madly in love with her. "Through fire I will run for thy sweet sake," he proclaims. Shocked and bewildered, Helena believes Lysander mocks her as some cruel joke. She knows he is really in love with Hermia, and she storms off angrily. Lysander runs after her.

Hermia then awakens to find her Lysander gone. She has been having a bad nightmare, and is desperate for his comfort. She gets up and decides to try and find him.

## ACT THREE

In the woods near where Titania lies asleep, the acting troupe begins rehearsal. They decide the roaring lion will be too ferocious for the ladies in the audience, so the actor will explain he is not really a lion, but a man dressed as a lion.

Puck comes upon the rehearsing group and watches for a few moments, imagining what sort of mischief he might cause. Aha! As Nick Bottom comes in to say his part, Puck changes his head into that of a donkey. Upon seeing this, Peter Quince cries, "O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted. Help!" The actors run away from Bottom and his donkey head, much to Puck's amusement.

Imagining his friends are playing a mean joke on him, Bottom begins to sing so they won't think he is afraid of being in the forest alone. Titania awakens at the sound of his singing, and falls instantly in love. The queen of the fairies summons her attendants to fawn over Bottom, feeding him, scratching him behind his long ears, and making him ever so comfortable.

Puck returns to Oberon to tell him of his excellent work. As they speak, Demetrius and Hermia appear. Hermia ran into Demetrius in her search for Lysander, and now he will not leave her alone. Demetrius professes his love for Hermia, just as before. But Hermia is convinced that Demetrius has harmed Lysander. She curses him, demanding Lysander be returned. Demetrius insists

he hasn't even seen Lysander, but Hermia runs away, determined to find her love. Demetrius, growing weary of the chase, lies down and falls asleep.

After observing this scene, Oberon is furious with Puck. "What hast thou done?" he demands. "You have laid the potion on the wrong man. It was this Athenian on whom you were to place the flower juice!" Puck tells Oberon it is an honest mistake, since both men are wearing Athenian clothing.

"Go find Helena," Oberon instructs him. "In the meantime, I will place the potion on the sleeping Demetrius' eyes, and be sure that Helena is the first person he sees when he wakes up!"

Soon Helena and Lysander wander by where Demetrius sleeps. Helena wants nothing to do with Lysander, and still searches for Demetrius, whom she loves. Demetrius wakes up when he hears them, and upon seeing Helena, falls instantly in love with her. "O Helena, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!" he cries.

Helena is shocked. She can hardly believe Demetrius is being truthful, and is sure he and Lysander are playing a cruel joke on her. "What about Hermia?" Lysander asks Demetrius. "I thought you loved her."

"My love for Hermia is melted as the snow," Demetrius replies. "I love Helena."

Hermia shows up moments later only to find that Lysander is no longer in love with her, but with Helena! Both she and Helena are shocked and amazed. Now Helena believes Lysander, Demetrius, and her best friend Hermia are all trying to make a fool out of her. Demetrius and Lysander agree to fight to the death to see who will win Helena's heart, and they leave for a better spot to duel. Helena and Hermia argue and accuse each other, and eventually part ways as bitter enemies.

Hoping to correct the confusion, Oberon commands Puck to cause a great fog to fall over the forest, so the two men cannot find each other and fight. Calling to each other, Lysander and Demetrius are separated further and further by Puck's tricks. Soon, Lysander and Demetrius both tire and fall asleep.

Meanwhile, Helena, looking for a way back to Athens, and Hermia, searching for Lysander, also lie down and fall asleep. Now that all four Athenians are asleep, Puck applies the flower juice to Lysander's eyes so he will again be in love with Hermia.

## ACT FOUR

In another part of the woods, Nick Bottom is enjoying his treatment by queen Titania and her servants. He orders them around, has them bring food, sing to him, and of course, scratch behind his large ears. However, all the activity tires Bottom, and he falls asleep in Titania's arms.

Observing this, Oberon is delighted with the results of his scheme. He has punished Titania well enough for refusing to give him the young child, and in her strange state, she has agreed to give him the boy. Now Oberon begins to feel sorry for his wife and decides it is time to end the spell. As Titania sleeps, Oberon applies the flower juice to her eyes, and then awakens her.

"Oberon!" the queen cries. "I had visions that I was in love with an ass."

"There lies your love," says Oberon, pointing to Bottom.

"Oh, how disgusting!" Titania exclaims. "How did this happen?"

"Never mind," Oberon replies, comforting her. "Now Puck, replace this man's head, and let us celebrate!"

The wedding day of Theseus and Hippolyta has now arrived. Theseus calls for a hunt to find a large animal to roast at the feast. As Theseus, Hippolyta, and their friend Egeus walk toward the hunting grounds, they come upon the four sleeping Athenians—Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius. Hearing noises, they wake up, surprised and startled.

"Isn't this the day Hermia must decide her fate, whether she will marry Demetrius as you commanded her, be put to death, or live in a nunnery?" asks Theseus.

"It is," Egeus replies.

The duke asks the young men how they came together in the forest since they are bitter enemies. The four young Athenians seem confused and groggy, and have no answers to his questions. Egeus asks for the law to come down on Lysander's head for trying to escape with his daughter Hermia. But Demetrius protests, claiming he now loves Helena and no longer wants to marry Hermia.

The duke is delighted that everyone seems to be getting along, and proclaims that Hermia no longer has to marry Demetrius, since he is happily in love with another woman. "Egeus," the duke proclaims, "there shall indeed be a wedding as you had planned; but it shall be sooner than later. For in the temple by and by with us shall these couples be wed. Now, let us return to Athens for a feast."

After the duke and his train leave, the four young Athenians stand alone for a few moments. They are confused, and none of them quite remember what happened the night before. It's as though it was all a dream. Pondering these thoughts, they make their way to the temple.

When Bottom wakes up, he imagines for a moment that he is still rehearsing for the play. "Most fair Pyramus," he recites, half asleep. "Wait a moment! Where is everyone? I thought I was . . . but then I was . . . Oh, it must have been a dream. And what a dream it was! Man is but an ass if he go about to expound on his dream!"



Back at Quince's house, the other actors worry about Bottom. "Without him, the play is doomed," Quince exclaims. Just then, Bottom enters the room, changed back to his human form. The other actors want to know what happened, but Bottom insists they hurry to the duke's palace to perform their play.

## ACT FIVE

At the palace, Philostrate, Theseus' entertainment advisor, informs Theseus about the play. Philostrate tells him the actors are amateurs, and the play is very simple. Perhaps they should forget the play and enjoy other entertainment instead, he suggests. "I will hear that play," Theseus insists. "For never can anything be amiss, when simpleness and duty tender it."

As the play unfolds, the duke, his wife, and the four young Athenians poke fun at the ridiculous dramatics displayed before them. The play is a tragedy about Pyramus and Thisby, two lovers separated by a wall. When kissing through a crack in the wall doesn't work, they agree to meet that night at a family tomb. Unfortunately, an unfriendly lion chases Thisby away from the tomb before Pyramus arrives. Pyramus, upon seeing Thisby's bloodied cape, assumes she is dead, and kills himself. Thisby, having escaped the lion, returns to find her Pyramus dead at the tomb. She then kills herself as well.

As the play comes to an end, Bottom asks if he should provide an epilogue. Theseus can take the melodramatics no longer and kindly tells Bottom to forget the epilogue, because it is late and time for bed. As everyone goes off to their bedrooms, the fairies gather together in the palace. Titania blesses the newly-married couples, and the fairies stray throughout the house to tend to the dreams of the lovers.



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Theseus** Duke of Athens

**Hippolyta** Queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus

**Egeus** Father of Hermia

**Demetrius** In love with Hermia

**Lysander** In love with Hermia

**Philstrate** Theseus' entertainment advisor

**Hermia** Daughter of Egeus, in love with Lysander

**Helena** In love with Demetrius

**Quince** a Carpenter

**Snug** a Joiner

**Bottom** a Weaver

**Flute** a Bellows-Mender

**Snout** a Tinker

**Starveling** a Tailor

**Oberon** King of the fairies

**Titania** Queen of the fairies

**Puck** a Sprite, also known as Robin Goodfellow

**Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed** Fairies

*Other fairies attending their king and queen*

*Attendants to Theseus and Hippolyta*