

THE STORY OF THE PLAY

A Midsummer Night's Dream opens with Duke Theseus of Athens and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, as they discuss their forthcoming wedding. They are interrupted by Egeus, with daughter Hermia in tow, along with her two suitors, Demetrius and Lysander. Though Hermia and Lysander are in love, Egeus insists that if his daughter does not wed Demetrius, she must die or enter a convent as the law states. Theseus reluctantly upholds the law, but gives Hermia three days to decide. To avoid this fate, she and Lysander plot to run away together. Helena appears, pining for Demetrius who once loved her. Hermia tells her friend of their plans for flight, and the love-sick Helena devises to win Demetrius' gratitude by informing him of the plot and then following him into the woods.

In another part of Athens, a group of everyday laborers (referred to in the play as "rude mechanicals") gather to rehearse a play for the wedding of Duke Theseus. Under the direction of Quince, and with a little too much advice from their lead actor Bottom, they cast their tale of Pyramus and Thisbe and conclude to meet and rehearse in the woods.

The wood itself is inhabited by fairies. Puck, a mischievous attendant to the fairy king, Oberon, tells of a battle between the king and queen for custody of a changeling boy (a child exchanged for another by the fairies). Tensions are high and the entire fairy kingdom is in a state of upheaval. Titania and Oberon enter, an argument ensues and Oberon vows revenge. He sends Puck to find a certain flower which was hit by Cupid's arrow. The flower, called "love-in-idleness", has this property: "The juice of it...will make a man or woman madly dote upon the next live creature that it sees."

Into this feud stumble Demetrius and Helena. Oberon witnesses her hopeless pursuit of the scornful lover and sends Puck to help with flower in hand. Puck, however, mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and anoints the wrong man. Helena finds Lysander who, waking, falls instantly and madly in love with her. When Oberon discovers the error, he anoints Demetrius as originally intended, and Demetrius also falls instantly and madly in love with a baffled Helena. Enter Hermia who has been desperately searching the woods for Lysander. The two men argue for Helena, who feels scorned; Hermia concludes that her best friend has stolen her lover; Helena feels mocked by Hermia and the four nearly come to blows as misunderstandings abound.

Meanwhile, Oberon has anointed Titania's eyes with the flower. Near her sleeping place the mechanicals rehearse their play until Puck decides to make some mischief. He places an ass-head on Bottom, who is left to sing away his fear after his friends flee him. At this moment, Titania awakes, sees Bottom and ...falls instantly and madly in love with him. She calls her fairies to attend and pamper him.

Oberon informs Puck that he now has the changeling boy. He instructs Puck to make the lovers sleep and gives him an antidote to the "love-in-idleness" flower. Oberon releases Titania from her spell, tells Puck to take the ass-head off Bottom and the fairies dance away into the night.

As morning dawns, Theseus, who has been hunting with Hippolyta, encounters the lovers. Demetrius announces that he is once again in love with Helena. Theseus overrides Egeus and proclaims that all three couples will be wed together.

After waking to wonder at his dream, Bottom returns to his friends. He is not quite able to recount what he has seen, but is ready to lead them on stage. Pyramus and Thisbe is performed, and the tragic play turns humorous in the hands of the mechanicals. Theseus thanks them and retires with Hippolyta to his bridal chamber.

The play ends with Puck coming to bless the house and finally, to offer advice to the audience. If for any reason they do not like the play, Puck suggests that they imagine they've fallen asleep at the show and dreamt the whole thing.

TEENAGERS IN LOVE

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the four adolescent lovers are quick to fall in and out of love (with 'help' from Puck) and capture the emotions that swing wildly across loyalties and friendships. Helena expresses her confusion at Demetrius' change of heart:

*For ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne
He hailed down oaths he was only mine
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt
So he dissolv'd, and show'rs of oaths did melt.*

Act I Scene 1

Bewitched with the power of the love-flower's juice, Lysander renounces his love for Hermia and turns his attention on Helena:

*Lysander: I had no judgment when to her (Hermia) I swore.
Helena: Nor none, in my mind, now you give her o'er.*

Act III Scene 2

The close friendship between young women is another subject of Shakespeare – and the pressures on friendship when boyfriends enter the picture. When Helena is convinced that the three of them have plotted a plan to mock her, she turns on Hermia, accusing her of betraying their life-long friendship:

*Is all the counsel we two have shar'd,
The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent,
When we have chide the hasty-footed time
For parting us – O, is all forgot?
All school-days friendship, childhood innocence?*

Act III Scene 2

The fiery nature of adolescent boys is also in Shakespeare's sights, as Lysander and Demetrius square off against each other to win Helena. In stereotypical boy fashion, they fall to fighting:

*Lysander: I swear by that which I will lose for thee (Helena),
To prove him (Demetrius) false that says I love thee not.
Demetrius: I say I love thee more than he can do.
Lysander: If thou say so, withdraw, and prove it so.
Demetrius: Quick, come!*

Act III Scene 2

Finally, Hermia turns on Helena and in her confusion, accuses Helena of stealing her boyfriend:

*O me, you juggler, you canker-blossom,
You thief of love! What, have you come by night
And stolen my love's heart from him?*

Act III Scene 2

Puck sums it all up in terms of the effects of love on mortals when he says: "*Lord, what fools these mortals be*" and "*Cupid is a knavish lad Thus to make poor females mad.*"

Activities

Discuss the characters of Helena, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius. Can you think of any contemporary examples of teenagers in love?

Imagine yourself as a counselor to one of the four lovers. What advice would you offer them?

What would you do given Hermia's three choices: marry a person you hated; go to your death; or enter a convent/seminary? What if these were your only choices?

A LOOK BACK AT A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM IN PERFORMANCE

It is believed that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed at a wedding. Though scholars have tried to discredit the idea, the myth has prevailed. Perhaps it is difficult to resist the idea of the mirror image during the final scene – that of a court of nobles at a wedding watching a play. At any rate, the play seems to have been written sometime between the years of 1594 – 1596. It is also interesting to note that during this time there were a series of unusually cold, wet summers, giving credence to Titania's description of the strange weather and altered seasons. It is around this time that Shakespeare also wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. It is unknown whether the Pyramus and Thisbe subplot was responsible for this inspiration, or if perhaps Shakespeare had finished his great play and was poking some fun at it.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was popular between this time and 1631. It was sometime in that year that a scandal was aroused by a Sunday performance in the house of a bishop. After the performance, the host was fined and a certain actor was taken to the stocks. He was required to sit there in an ass head with hay in his mouth as punishment for performing certain unsavory passages and "brutish impersonations." Here was evidence that society was changing. The bawdy humor so popular in Shakespeare's time was no longer acceptable. The theatres closed in 1660.

Often we can trace history's changes through art, architecture and the theatre; and through Shakespeare's popular play, performed so often during the ages, we can see reflected the social and political climate of the day.

After the theatres reopened, the play was done in parts. There are no records of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* being performed for thirty years after this, and it wasn't until 1827 that the play was performed again in its entirety.

In the mid-1800s, two famous productions were done in London and Germany. In 1840, Lucia Elizabeth Vestis offered more of the text than had been performed in two hundred years. She also set another precedent by taking the role of Oberon. After this interpretation, Oberon was played by a woman in every major English and American production of the play until 1914. And in 1843, Felix Mendelssohn created his famous musical score, giving us the Wedding March still used today. These two elements were inseparable from the play for the rest of the century.

During the Victorian age scenic art was at its best. Sometimes the public demand took precedence over the play. The Victorians objected to quarreling in public and in 1888 in an opera staging of the piece, most of the lovers scenes were cut down to monologues for the men. Demetrius and Lysander were praised by the critics as "men of gallant bearing", and "pictures of manly grace." But another playwright, George Bernard Shaw, ridiculed it "from the scenery to the speaking of the verse."

In 1900, spectacle was all the rage. Extravagant versions were done and one notable production had live rabbits, birds and dense foliage. During one performance, an actor playing Bottom finally drove one distracting rabbit offstage for stealing focus. When he repented and brought the rabbit on for the curtain call, it bit him. One critic praised the troupe of rabbits as the best part of the show.

A Midsummer Night's Dream has been one of the most frequently performed Shakespearean plays in the 20th century. In this time, as in ages past, we see the social and political atmosphere reflected in the history of this popular production.

During Hitler's rise to power in the first part of this century, the play was a center of controversy. Mendelssohn's music had become a popular part of the play, but now his name and his works were being struck from the theatres. Not a single production could use the stunning score. The famous director Max Reinhardt (also Jewish by decent) lost his theatre in Berlin. But in 1933, the Italian government invited him to direct the play for their May festival. It was one of the most lavish productions in Florence, set in the famous Boboli Gardens with a palace as its background. Reinhardt used Mendelssohn's beautiful score and hundreds of fire-fly lights to illuminate the stage. When Oxford University asked him to stage the play he sent on a message requesting "eighty extras and a lake." Oxford was happy to comply. Hitler's Germany never saw the gorgeous pageantry created by her native son, but the rest of the world relished it. In 1935 the film version was produced for Hollywood starring James Cagney as Bottom and Mickey Rooney as Puck.

Perhaps the most famous modern production was Peter Brook's controversial adaptation in 1970. He set the scenes up as circus acts, complete with fairies swinging from the trapeze. A few thought the staging overwhelmed the poetry and one scholar reportedly closed his eyes during the play, "loving the way it was spoken, hating the way it was presented." After this groundbreaking production, highly conceptual treatments of Shakespeare's plays became more and more popular.

The play has been made into a film numerous times (five of them silent) and most recently was done with a star-filled cast from Broadway, TV, Hollywood and the London stage.

Montana Shakespeare in the Parks has produced the play several times. In 1978, director Bill Pullman used puffy soft sculptures for the fairies; director Tom Morris used a contemporary 1980s setting, casting the lovers as "valley girls and guys, the fairies as punk rockers, the king and queen as Texas-style oil barons; and the mechanicals as "guys who like to bowl" (Bottom was a used car salesman). Artistic director, Joel Jahnke, set his production in Bavaria, complete with lederhosen. Wood creatures that might imaginatively inhabit that magical place inspired the fairy world.

The never-ending search for meaning in Shakespeare's poetry and characters is testament to the playwright's power and genius. Each time a director approaches one of his plays, he or she hopes to bring light to something previously hidden and with Shakespeare, even after 400 years, there seems to be more and more to find.

Activities

Devise your own production concept for the play. Decide on the time, the setting and how that decision affects the presentation of the characters. What would your fairyland look like? Design costumes and sets that reflect your concept.

Discuss the costumes and scenery for the Shakespeare in the Schools production. What do you think was the director's concept for this production?

SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRICAL LANGUAGE

Enjoyment of Shakespeare's plays can be enhanced by an understanding of the subtleties of his use of language. Helena's "How happy some o'er other some can be" speech is called a soliloquy, which is a speech in which a character is not speaking to anyone, but is thinking out loud and thus speaking truth as far as he or she understands it. When characters are conversing, or speaking dialogue, we have to keep in mind that each might be trying to persuade, deceive or test the other during the conversation. Words suggest emotions, relationships and motivations.

Shakespeare employs several forms of language in his plays: Prose, blank verse, and rhymed verse. Prose is what we think of as everyday speech, without specific rules of rhyme and rhythm. An example would be Bottom's lines: "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can."

Blank Verse is the verse Shakespeare most often uses in his plays. It is called blank verse because it is unrhymed and each line has ten syllables, with the even-numbered syllables emphasized more strongly in pronunciation. This pattern is called iambic pentameter, because the rhythm is based on iambs (or unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables) and there are five iambs ("penta" meaning five). That's ten syllables all together. That pattern flows easily for speakers of English. If you say "I went downtown to buy a card today" with normal inflection, you will have spoken a line of iambic pentameter.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I went downtown to buy a card today.

Actors find – as Shakespeare, and actor likely knew – that the rhythm helps them to remember their lines. Consider these lines of Hippolyta:

*Four days will quickly steep themselves in night
Four nights will quickly dream away the time
And then the moon like to a silver bow
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.*

Shakespeare does not slavishly follow the rhythm in every line, which can become boring. He occasionally varies the stresses or uses a period in the middle of a line, which causes us to pause longer. He sometimes splits the line so that two characters share the ten syllables. This is called a shared line, and helps show quick thinking or strong emotion as in these lines by Hermia and Helena:

*Hermia: Do you not jest?
Helena: Yes sooth, and so do you.*

Thus we have both the effect of poetry AND of natural speech. Rhymed Verse consists of lines which rhyme at the end, usually in couplets, or pairs. Shakespeare sometimes uses rhymed verse to signal a character's heightened emotional state or the conclusion of an act or scene, such as Theseus' lines:

*Away with us to Athens; three and three,
We'll hold a feast in great solemnity.*

Did people in Shakespeare's day speak in rhymed verse? No, of course not – no more than we speak in rap. But then and now, people have enjoyed the rhythms and rhyme of verse. And just for fun, here is a rap about Shakespeare from the January 1991 issue of MAD Magazine (via the Bathhouse Theatre guide to Love's Labour's Lost). Note that this rap, like a sonnet, has fourteen lines.

I'm Will the Thrill...the Stratford ace,
 So better lis-ten...up good, 'cause I'm in ya face;
 The play's...the...thing, but they tell me, a-las,
 That you clods fall asleep reading mine...in...class;
 Well, I just...found...out what the world...en-joys,
 So I've borrowed...this...beat from the Beast-ie Boys;
 Is this...a...rap-per...that...you...see?
 Gadzooks! Sure is, because the rap's...on...me!
 I'm the noblest show-man...of...them...all,
 And I've given...my...gigs and over-haul;
 Yea, the game's a-foot, and all the world's...a...stage
 For the sound and the fury of this hot...new...rage;
 A bard should be made of...stern-er...stuff,
 So get up...to...date and Rap on McDuff!

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Sample vocabulary from the play:

apricocks	- apricots	chide	- scold
churl	- someone without manners	cur	- a mean dog
dote	- fawn over	enamour'd of	- fond
gambol	- covert, frolic	gleek	- joke, play
leviathan	- a mythical sea-monster, whale	mark	- notice
methinks	- I believe	night-tapers	- candles
ousel	- a heavy-bodied, perching bird	perforce	- necessarily
perchance	- maybe (by chance)	square	- fight
throstle	- a thrush	troth	- faith, truth

Activities

Try to create your own rap from the scenes you've watched.

Consider the words above. The meanings of words like "chide" and "perforce" you could guess, even though we no longer use those words; other words, like "square" or "mark" are still used, but have significantly different definitions. And then there are words like "apricocks" or "gleek" that are just fun to say over and hear, even if they seem nonsensical. Why might word meanings evolve over time? How do words suggest people's needs and attitudes?

Shakespeare's era was one of linguistic experimentation, and the compilers of the OED credit Shakespeare with the first use of a number of words. Write a brief letter – one that can be understood – for which you invent many of the nouns and verbs.

Rewrite a passage from one of Shakespeare's plays in modern Montana slang. If Shakespeare were to read your version, what words would need to be defined? How would you define them? Can you provide them with word histories?

RESOURCES

Books and Journals

Aers, Lesley, and Nigel Wheale, eds. Shakespeare in the Changing Curriculum. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Davis, James E., and Ronald E. Solomone, eds. Teaching Shakespeare Today: Practical Approaches and Productive Strategies. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

Epstein, Norrie. The Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard. New York: Viking, 1993.

Frey, Charles H. Experiencing Shakespeare: Essays on Text, Classroom, and Performance. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988.

Gilbert, Miriam. "Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance," Shakespeare Quarterly, 35 (1984), 601-608.

Griffin, C.W. "Teaching Shakespeare on Video." English Journal, 78:7 (1989), 40-43.

McMurty, Jo. Understanding Shakespeare's England: A Companion for the American Reader. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1989.

McDonald, Russ. The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents. Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Papp, Joseph, and Elizabeth Kirkland. Shakespeare Alive! New York: Bantam Books and the New York Shakespeare Festival, 1988.

Robinson, Randal. Unlocking Shakespeare's Language: Help for the Teacher and Student. Urbana, IL: NCTE and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1989.

Rygiel, Mary Ann. Shakespeare Among Schoolchildren: Approaches for the Secondary Classroom. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

Salomone, Ronald E., and James E. Davis, eds. Teaching Shakespeare into the 21st Century. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997.

Shakespeare, a journal sponsored by Cambridge University Press and Georgetown University, focuses on the teaching of Shakespeare at the secondary and university levels. Email and editors at editors@shakespearemag.com

Shakespeare Quarterly, special teaching issue, 41: 2 (Summer 1990); special issue on teaching Shakespeare with women writers of his era, 47: 4 (Winter 1996).

Video

The BBC has produced the entire canon of Shakespeare's plays on video tape. Check your local library. If the tapes are not available there, inquire about interlibrary loan within the state.

Available through video rental stores are a number of fine films, such as the Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh versions of *Henry V* and the Mel Gibson and Branagh *Hamlets*. *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are available in recent and accessible versions.

See also Teaching Shakespeare: New Approaches from the Folger Shakespeare Library, a guide by Peggy O'Brien, Former Education Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, available through Vineyard Video Productions.

On the Internet

Numerous sites now provide wonderful materials on Shakespeare:

For the website associated with Shakespeare magazine, see <http://www.shakespearemag.com>

For texts of the plays, see the Shakespeare Homepage:

<http://the-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html>

For information on the World Shakespeare Bibliography and links to other Shakespeare sites, see

<http://www-english.tamu.edu/wsb/>

For the Folger Shakespeare Library, see

<http://www/folger.edu/>

For educational materials on Shakespeare, see the National Endowment for the Arts project titled, Shakespeare in American Communities.

<http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/>