

**A Guide to
A MIDSUMMER
NIGHT'S DREAM**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in or around 1595. He had just turned thirty, and was already developing a formidable reputation as a playwright and poet. He had left his native Stratford-on-Avon for London some five years before, and was by now a member of the most prestigious and successful acting company in the capital, his plays receiving acclaim both at the public playhouses and at the court of Queen Elizabeth.

A severe outbreak of the plague, which had resulted in the closure of the London theatres for two years, was now over; the theatres were back in business, and Shakespeare, who had meanwhile been devoting his time to poetry, returned to playwriting. The results were spectacular. *Romeo and Juliet*, his tragedy of the two young lovers, caused a sensation; and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which followed soon afterwards, was another resounding success.

Although the play was undoubtedly written for the public stage, it is likely that the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was at a wedding-party attended by the Queen. Ten years later, the same play was to be performed at the court of her successor, King James, another great admirer of Shakespeare. However, Shakespeare's appeal was never limited to courtly circles; his great strength as a dramatist was his enduring popularity with the public. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like so much of his work, possesses a richness, complexity and resonance that have proved irresistible to audiences throughout the years.

"It is some measure of the play's strength that it is almost infallibly entertaining under any circumstances ... It is not simply by a happy accident that A Midsummer Night's Dream has retained for four centuries its power to entertain. Rather it is because this is a highly articulated structure, the product of a genius working with total mastery of his poetic and theatrical craft."

Stanley Wells, Introduction to the New Penguin Shakespeare edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

War gives way to love

Theseus, Duke of Athens, has returned home victorious from the wars.

Among the Duke's conquests is the distant eastern land of Scythia, home of the Amazon warrior women. He has captured the Amazon Queen, Hippolyta, and brought her back to Athens: the two of them have fallen in love, and are soon to be married.

Curtain up

A disobedient daughter

I, i

Duke Theseus is impatient. His marriage to Hippolyta will take place in four days' time, when the new crescent moon appears in the heavens, and the days seem to be dragging by with unbearable sluggishness. Hippolyta reassures him that the time will soon pass:

Hippolyta: Four days will quickly steep themselves¹ 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.²

¹ *sink, immerse themselves*

² *celebrations*

Theseus tells Philostrate, his Master of the Revels, to prepare festivities throughout Athens in celebration of his forthcoming marriage. He is determined that the wedding, in contrast to the violent struggle that preceded it, will be a happy and memorable occasion:

Theseus: Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.

As Philostrate leaves, Egeus, an Athenian courtier, comes before the Duke, accompanied by his daughter Hermia. Following them are two young men, Demetrius and Lysander.

Egeus has come to ask for the Duke's help. He has decided, he explains, that his daughter is to marry Demetrius: but, to his exasperation, she has fallen in love with Lysander, and now refuses absolutely to go along with her father's wishes. Egeus accuses Lysander of tricking Hermia into loving him in a multitude of subtle, deceitful ways:

Egeus: Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
And interchang'd love-tokens with my child:
Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung
With faining¹ voice verses of feigning love,
And stol'n the impression of her fantasy²
With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits,
Knacks, trifles, nosegays ...

¹ *soft, quiet*

² *captured her imagination*

Infuriated at his daughter's disobedience, Egeus delivers a public ultimatum. If she continues to reject Demetrius, he will assert his right as a father, as enshrined in Athenian law:

Egeus: ... Be it so she will not here, before your Grace,
Consent to marry with Demetrius,
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:
As she is mine, I may dispose of her;
Which shall be either to this gentleman,
Or to her death ...

Demetrius urges Hermia to obey her father, and calls on Lysander to give up his claim to Hermia's love. Lysander responds heatedly. He is as good a man as Demetrius, he declares; besides, Hermia loves him, not Demetrius.

Moreover, Lysander reveals, Demetrius already has an admirer: her name is Helena, and Demetrius claimed to be in love with her before he met Hermia. Helena, though rejected, is still devoted to Demetrius. Lysander accuses his rival of inconstancy, a charge that Demetrius is unable to deny.

The lovers remain defiant

With a final warning to Hermia that there will be serious consequences if she disregards her father's decision, Theseus leaves. Hippolyta is dismayed: but the law must be obeyed, insists the Duke, come what may. He too is unhappy with the situation, and asks Demetrius and Egeus to go with him so that they can discuss the matter in private.

The two lovers are left alone to contemplate their plight. Lysander tries to comfort Hermia. Lovers have always faced obstacles, he assures her:

Lysander: ... For aught¹ that I could ever read,
 Could ever hear by tale or history,
 The course of true love never did run smooth ...

¹ *from anything*

Even when love has not been thwarted by family hostilities, one legend after another shows how it has always proved precarious and brief:

Lysander: ... if there were a sympathy in choice,¹
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 collied² night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds³ both heaven and earth,
And, ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!',
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.

¹ *even if no-one was against the match*

² *coal-black*

³ *reveals, in a fit of passion*

“There is no play of Shakespeare’s that demands such sustained delicacy of treatment ... The verse has the virtues of chamber music. It is never robustly declamatory; it asks constantly for a quiet clarity of utterance ... it has neither sharp turns of phrase, nor sudden checking of pace, nor one twisted or tortured thought. It flows on like a river in sunlight.”

Harley Granville-Barker, Preface to *The Players’ Shakespeare* edition, 1924

If love has always been so fraught with problems, reflects Hermia, the two of them must be prepared to face hardship. Lysander agrees; but something occurs to him that might allow them to marry whilst escaping the retribution demanded by Hermia's father.

About twenty miles from Athens lives Lysander's aunt, a wealthy, childless widow who treats the young man like a son. If he and Hermia can reach her house, explains Lysander, they will be beyond the power of the Athenian law, and the two of them can marry in safety. He asks Hermia to slip away from her father's house tomorrow night, in secrecy, and meet him in the wood just outside Athens. It is a place they both know; they once met there, early one May morning, in a ceremony celebrating the arrival of summer. From the wood they can make their way to the widow's house, where they will be married.

Hermia agrees to the plan without hesitation, and gives Lysander her word that she will join him tomorrow night. Her promise is given solemnly, but she cannot resist teasing Lysander about the fickleness of men:

Hermia: ... I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest bow,
By his best arrow with the golden head,
By the simplicity¹ of Venus' doves ...
By all the vows that ever men have broke
(In number more than ever women spoke),
In that same place thou hast appointed me,
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee.

¹ *harmlessness, gentleness*

Helena learns a secret

Helena now joins the two lovers. She is hopelessly in love with Demetrius, and desperately wishes that he loved her instead of Hermia. She asks her friend how she has managed to enchant Demetrius, but Hermia admits that she is baffled. She has done everything she can to persuade Demetrius that his love is unwanted, but without success:

Helena: O, teach me how you look, and with what art
You sway¹ the motion of Demetrius' heart.

Hermia: I frown upon him; yet he loves me still.

Helena: O that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill!

Hermia: I give him curses; yet he gives me love.

Helena: O that my prayers could such affection move!

Hermia: The more I hate, the more he follows me.

Helena: The more I love, the more he hateth me.

Hermia: His folly, Helena, is no fault of mine.

Helena: None but your beauty; would that fault were mine!

¹ *govern, control*

However, Hermia has some comforting news for Helena. She explains that she and Lysander plan to elope tomorrow, under cover of darkness. Demetrius will never see her again; perhaps his affection for Helena will be rekindled.

Hermia, who has been Helena's friend since childhood, now bids her a fond farewell, and leaves to prepare for her escape. Lysander leaves too, with a final wish that Helena's love for Demetrius will eventually be returned.

Left on her own, Helena reflects on the unfairness and illogicality of love. Everyone else believes that she is as beautiful as Hermia, but Demetrius seems to be unaware of her beauty.

It is with good reason that Cupid is always shown blindfolded in pictures, Helena realises:

Helena: Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind ...

Demetrius used to love her, and even though he has proved himself inconstant Helena cannot stop loving him. She decides, on a sudden impulse, to tell Demetrius about the elopement. In all probability he will set off at once in pursuit of Hermia; but at least he will be grateful to Helena for the revelation, and his gratitude will give her something to treasure.

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind ...

One of the many themes woven into the fabric of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is sight: the eyes are mentioned more often in this play than in any other. The emphasis, however, is on the deceptiveness of appearances and the constant possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting what we see. This preoccupation has given the play a particular significance for our own age:

"... it was not until the twentieth century that scholars began to comprehend the philosophical depth and dramatic complexity of Shakespeare's creation. What was once considered a light, insubstantial play or fairy tale is now regarded as one of Shakespeare's most satisfying works, and a keen dramatic investigation into concerns he was to treat more seriously in his later comedies and tragedies: the nature of love, the influence of the spiritual world on the mortal, the conflict between appearance and reality ... Shakespeare was nearing the height of his powers as a comic playwright."

Mark W. Scott, *Shakespearean Criticism*, 1986

An amateur dramatic society

I, ii

A group of workmen has gathered to prepare for a play which they intend to perform in honour of Duke Theseus' wedding. Quince, a carpenter, is in charge, and he starts by checking that everyone is present. However, he is immediately interrupted by Nick Bottom, a weaver, who cannot resist advising Quince on the running of the meeting:

Bottom: First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors; and so grow to a point.

Quince: Marry, our play is 'The most Lamentable Comedy, and most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe'.

Bottom: A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors ...

Quince proceeds to call out the names of the participants. Bottom is first on the list. Confirming that he is present, he asks what role he is to play; Quince replies that he has the part of Pyramus, a lover whose passion drives him to a noble, tragic suicide. Bottom immediately becomes excited at the prospect of moving the audience to tears, although his speciality, he explains, is in playing powerful, blustering roles like Hercules. He gives a brief, noisy demonstration, then assures the others that he will play the part of a lover more tenderly. Finally, Quince is allowed to continue with his roll call.

Flute, the bellows-mender, is told that he is to play Thisbe, Pyramus's beloved. Flute is disappointed; he would rather not play the part of a woman, as he is convinced that his meagre beard is starting to grow. The irrepressible Bottom volunteers to play Thisbe as well as Pyramus, and gives another impromptu demonstration of his acting prowess; but Quince rules against him.

All the workmen in the amateur company have names fitting to their trades. Quince is probably named after the 'quoins' or wooden wedges that he uses as a carpenter. A 'bottom' is the core around which the weaver's yarn is wound. Flute as a bellows-mender would repair the pipes of church organs, while a tinker would mend the 'snout' or spout of a kettle. A joiner's work should be 'snug' or tight-fitting.

The name of Robin Starveling reflects the fact that tailors were traditionally poor and undernourished. This part, incidentally, was undoubtedly written for John Sincler, the 'thin man' of Shakespeare's acting company. Other roles written with the emaciated Sincler in mind crop up in many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

Quince now announces the casting of the remaining parts. The emaciated Robin Starveling, a tailor, will play Thisbe's mother: Tom Snout the tinker will be Pyramus's father: and Quince himself will play Thisbe's father. The final member of the cast is Snug, the joiner, who will play the part of a lion.

Snug is apprehensive; he admits to being a slow learner, and requests a copy of his part as soon as possible so that he has time to memorise it. Quince reassures him that no learning is involved; all he needs to do is give the occasional roar. Nick Bottom barges in again, volunteering to play the lion. Once again Quince rules against him; his roaring would terrify Theseus' bride and the other ladies. Bottom promises to be considerate:

Bottom: ... I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you and¹ 'twere any nightingale.

¹ as if

Bottom must play Pyramus, insists Quince: the role is a heroic, gallant one, and demands an actor of Bottom's stature. Bottom is satisfied, but immediately becomes engrossed in another topic: what should be the colour of Pyramus's beard? As a weaver he is familiar with many dyes, but his choice of possible colours – gold, orange, purple or yellow – is questionable.

Quince now hands out the various parts for the actors to study, asking them all to learn their lines by tomorrow night. In order to keep the whole project secret, he has decided that they will rehearse at night, by moonlight, in a wood just outside Athens.

There was a wide range of theatrical activity in Shakespeare's day. Although there were relatively few professional companies like Shakespeare's own, there were many semi-professional and amateur groups who put on shows at weddings, parties and fairs, and there were plenty of tavern comedians, clowns, fools, dancers and acrobats. While plays and shows were popular at the royal Court and at many great houses, there was strong resistance from Puritans who had an increasingly powerful influence in the Church and in local government. One of the most vociferous opponents was an ex-playwright who underwent a radical change of heart in his twenties and became a Puritan clergyman:

“The argument of tragedies is wrath, cruelty, incest, injury, murder ... the ground-work of comedies is love, cozenage,¹ flattery, bawdry, sly conveyance of whoredom ... what schooling is this? Sometime you shall see nothing but the adventures of an amorous knight, passing from country to country for the love of his lady, encountering many a terrible monster made of brown paper ... What learn you by that? When the soul of your plays is either mere trifles, or Italian bawdry, or wooing of gentlewomen, what are ye taught?”

¹ trickery

Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, 1582

The spirit world is revealed

II, i

The Athenian wood is home to a host of fairies and spirits, invisible to humans. Two such beings now meet. One is an attendant of the Fairy Queen, Titania, and the other serves Oberon, King of the fairy world. As Titania's follower says, the obstacles of the human world are no barrier to the spirits as they go about their business:

Fairy: Over hill, over dale,
Thorough¹ bush, thorough briar,
Over park,² over pale,³
Thorough flood, thorough fire,
I do wander everywhere ...

¹ *through*

² *enclosed hunting land*

³ *ground surrounded by fences*

Oberon's servant reveals that his master and Titania have fallen out. The Queen has stolen a little boy from the mortal world: and Oberon wants the changeling, the son of an Indian King, as one of his followers. Titania, however, is keeping the boy for herself, pampering him and bedecking him with flowers. The changeling is the subject of continual argument between the Fairy King and Queen:

Puck: ... now they never meet in grove or green,
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,¹
But they do square;² that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn-cups, and hide them there.

¹ *gleaming, shining*

² *quarrel, confront one another*

Titania's fairy suddenly recognises Oberon's attendant as Robin Goodfellow, the notorious spirit also known as Puck, renowned for his mischievous interference in human affairs:

Fairy: Are you not he
That frights the maidens of the villagery,
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,¹
And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,²
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?

¹ *steal the cream from milk, so that the housewife becomes exhausted in her fruitless effort to make butter in the churn*

² *take the froth from the ale, make it flat*

Puck proudly confirms that the fairy is right. He gleefully describes some of the tricks he plays to amuse his master Oberon, tricks which cause the everyday mishaps that mortals find so inexplicable:

Puck: ... sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab,¹
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob,
And on her wither'd dewlap² pour the ale.

¹ *roasted crab apple, sometimes put in spiced ale to add flavour*

² *sagging chin*

Puck is interrupted by the entrance of his master Oberon: and at the same time, coming from the opposite direction, Titania approaches.

Belief in mischievous fairies and spirits was fairly widespread in Shakespeare's day, particularly in rural areas. Robin Goodfellow – probably so named to avoid giving offence to the elusive creature – was believed by the superstitious to carry out malicious pranks if not treated kindly. If a bowl of milk and bread was left out for him at night, on the other hand, he would cause no trouble, and might even perform unaccountable good turns around the house.

“The creature variously called puck, pouka, pixie, bugbear and hobgoblin, as well as the other fairies, was dangerous, and an Elizabethan audience could not contemplate him or his associates as representatives of the unknown without some apprehension.”

David Young, *Something of Great Constancy*, 1966

Discord among the fairies

As Puck had predicted, Oberon and Titania clash at once. The Fairy Queen threatens to make a dramatic exit as soon as she sets eyes on the King:

Oberon: Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.

Titania: What, jealous Oberon? Fairies, skip hence;
I have forsworn¹ his bed and company.

¹ *sworn to avoid*

Oberon orders Titania to stay: but he has lost his right to give her orders, she replies, by his relentless pursuit of women of the mortal world. She names Hippolyta, shortly to be married, as one of his recent loves. Oberon retorts that he is well aware of Titania's own attempts to entice the mortal Theseus.