

Sacramento Theatre Company

Study Guide



A Midsummer Night's Dream

By: William Shakespeare

Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles

Sacramento Theatre Company

Mission Statement

The Sacramento Theatre Company (STC) strives to be the leader in integrating professional theatre with theatre arts education. STC produces engaging professional theatre, provides exceptional theatre training, and uses theatre as a tool for educational engagement.

Our History

The theatre was originally formed as the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre in 1942, an ad hoc troupe formed to entertain locally-stationed troops during World War II. On October 18, 1949, the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre acquired a space of its own with the opening of the Eaglet Theatre, named in honor of the Eagle, a Gold Rush-era theatre built largely of canvas that had stood on the city's riverfront in the 1850s. The Eaglet Theatre eventually became the Main Stage of the not-for-profit Sacramento Theatre Company, which evolved from a community theatre to professional theatre company in the 1980s. Now producing shows in three performance spaces, it is the oldest theatre company in Sacramento.

After five decades of use, the Main Stage was renovated as part of the H Street Theatre Complex Project. Features now include an expanded and modernized lobby and a Cabaret Stage for special performances. The facility also added expanded dressing rooms, laundry capabilities, and other equipment allowing the transformation of these performance spaces, used nine months of the year by STC, into backstage and administration places for three months each summer to be used by California Musical Theatre for Music Circus.

Sacramento Theatre Company can accommodate 292 patrons in the proscenium-style auditorium of its Main Stage, while the Pollock Stage offers a more intimate experience with only 87 seats in a black box-style theatre. Both provide good acoustics and sight-lines. This professional, Equity theatre presents seven professional productions per season with a reputation for excellent stage adaptations of classic literature. Three annual productions in the Cabaret Stage, which seats 100, round out the experience with high-quality Broadway musical revues.

The Young Professionals Conservatory, a training program for young theatre artists, was founded in 2003. The program, as well as the entire STC School of the Arts, is directed by Michele Hillen-Noufer.

For further information about the Sacramento Theatre Company please visit us online:

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*written for the Sacramento Theatre Company by Anna Miles

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Synopsis: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Theseus, duke of Athens, after conquering the warrior Amazons in battle, is in turn conquered by the charms of their queen, Hippolyta, and they are now planning to marry. To speed the time until their wedding night, he orders amusements to be staged. In a spirit of loyalty, Bottom the weaver and other tradesmen decide to prepare a play for the duke and his bride.

The preparations are interrupted by Egeus, an Athenian, who brings his daughter, Hermia, and her two suitors before Theseus, entreating him to command Hermia to wed Demetrius. Hermia pleads to be allowed to marry the other suitor, the one she loves-Lysander. The duke orders her to obey her father under penalty of death or confinement in a convent. Hermia and Lysander bewail the harsh decree and secretly agree to meet in a wood nearby and flee to another country. They tell their plans to Helena, a jilted sweetheart of Demetrius, and she, to win back his love, goes straightway to inform him of the plan.

Meanwhile, in the forest, the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania are at odds. In spite, Oberon bids Puck procure a love-juice to pour upon Titania's eyelids when she is asleep, in order that she may love the first thing her waking eyes behold. Just then, Oberon sees Demetrius, who has sought out the trysting-place of Lysander and Hermia only to meet Helena, much to his distaste. The lady's distress at her lover's coldness softens the heart of Oberon, who bids Puck touch Demetrius's eyes also with the love-juice, for Helena's sake.

Meanwhile, Lysander and Hermia arrive, and Puck in error anoints Lysander's instead of Demetrius's eyes, so that Lysander, happening to awake just as the neglected Helena wanders by, falls in love with her-and abandons Hermia.

The same enchanted spot in the forest happens to be the place selected by Bottom and company for the final rehearsal of their play. The roguish Puck passes that way while they are rehearsing, and mischievously and magically crowns Bottom with an ass's head, whereupon the other players disperse terror-stricken. Then he brings Bottom to Titania; and, when she awakens, she gazes first upon the human-turned-to-an-ass and falls in love.

And in the meantime, the four lovers are greatly bewildered. Oberon finds that Puck has anointed the eyes of Lysander instead of those of Demetrius, so Oberon anoints Demetrius's eyes with another potion which breaks the spell. When Demetrius awakes, he sees his neglected Helena being wooed by Lysander. His own love for her returns, and he is ready to fight Lysander. Helena deems them both to be mocking her, and Hermia is dazed by the turn of affairs. The fairies interpose and prevent conflict by causing the four to wander about in the dark until they are tired and fall asleep. Puck repairs the blunder by anointing Lysander's eyes, in order to dispel the illusion caused by the love-juice. Thus, when they awake, all will be in order: Lysander will love Hermia, and Demetrius will love Helena.

Titania woos Bottom until Oberon, whose anger has abated, removes the spell from her eyes. Bottom is restored to his natural form, and he rejoins his comrades in Athens. Theseus, on an early morning hunting trip in the forest, discovers the four lovers. Explanations, follow; the duke relents and bestows Helena upon Demetrius and Hermia upon Lysander.

A wedding-feast for three couples instead of one only is spread in Duke Theseus's place. Bottom's players come to this feast to present the "comic" tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe, which is performed in wondrous and hilarious fashion. After the company retires for the night, the fairies dance through the corridors on a mission of blessing and goodwill for the three wedded pairs.

Characters: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Theseus: The duke of Athens, Theseus is betrothed to Hippolyta, the warrior queen. His nuptial day is at hand, and, while the other lovers are agitated, bewildered, and incensed, Theseus remains in calm possession of his joy. He is a good and thoughtful ruler.

Hippolyta: The warrior queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta is betrothed to Theseus. She has been captured by, and is subject to, her intended husband, but is also strong and wise in her own right.

Philostrate: As master of the revels at Duke Theseus's court, Philostrate is responsible for planning the court entertainments, including the wedding party.

Egeus: The parent of Hermia, Egeus insists on the rights as a parent to choose his daughter's husband.

Hermia: The daughter of Egeus, Hermia, despite her father's wishes and threats, is in love with Lysander and is the strongest of the four lovers whose adventures in the enchanted wood are the centerpiece of the play.

Lysander: The least distinctive of the four young lovers, Lysander is, however, deeply and tenderly in love with Hermia.

Demetrius: Also in love with Hermia, Demetrius was, before the play opened, in love with Helena, and, by play's end, is again in love with her.

Helena: The last of the four young lovers, Helena is obsessed with Demetrius, even to the extent of shaming herself and betraying her friend, Hermia.

Oberon: King of the fairies, Oberon works the magic that ensures the triumph of love that is the focus of the play. He gives an unpleasant first impression, but, in the end, he is a gentle and good-natured king and a playful husband.

Titania: Queen of the fairies, Titania leads a luxurious, merry life, given to the pleasures of the senses, the secrets of nature, and the powers of flowers and herbs.

Puck: Oberon's servant, Puck is a happy-go-lucky practical joker. He is the source of much of the confusion for all the lovers.

Fairies: Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed attend upon Titania and later on Nick Bottom. Shakespeare's portrayal lends them a charm that was not always agreed upon in Elizabethan times.

Peter Quince: A carpenter, Peter Quince is the leader of the "rustics," a band of country citizens who plan on presenting the play *Piramus and Thisbe* for the wedding celebration of Theseus and Hippolyta.

Nick Bottom: A weaver and one of the "rustics," Nick Bottom is a "hale fellow" with all his mates. He is easy-going, kind, and pleasant. It is Bottom who gets caught in the middle of the quarrel between Oberon and Titania and is changed into an ass with whom Titania falls magically in love.

Francis Flute: A bellows mender, Francis Flute is also one of the "rustics."

Tom Snout: A tinker, Tom Snout is one of the "rustics."

Snug: A joiner, Snug is one of the "rustics."

Robin Starveling: A tailor, Robin Starveling is one of the "rustics."

About *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies and has long been a favorite for both professional and amateur productions. The play is a fantasy of folklore and fairies, a medley of poetry, song, and dance, with vivid contrasts between the dainty folk in Titania's train and the "rude mechanicals" in Bottom's company. Shakespeare possibly wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the wedding of some great personage, but that personage's identity has escaped historians. An elaborate compliment to Queen Elizabeth in Act Two refers to her as the "fair Vestal, throned by the West," and we assume from these lines that Elizabeth was in attendance at the opening performance. The play has many qualities of a masque, an elaborate show emphasizing spectacular costume and scenic devices rather than dramatic plot and poetry.

The spirit of the masque is evident in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but Shakespeare's genius always transcends conventions, and this play is a poetic drama rather than a stereotype pageant. There is meaning and significance deeper than mere entertainment. There is a commentary on life and love, the whimsical and irresponsible aspects of love, and the midsummer madness that has no explanation except the whims of men and women and deviltry of Puck.

Shakespeare contemplates these moods and qualities with no spirit of criticism or reproof. Love, he tells us, can make men and women do many foolish things, but we laugh gaily at such folly and accept it as part of life.

Shakespearean scholars cannot agree on definite dates for either the creation or first production of this play. Possibly it was written originally around 1592 then went through several revisions, with a definite first publication date of 1600.

Sources of the plot are numerous. Plutarch and Chaucer possibly supplied models for Theseus and Hippolyta, Ovid for Titania and for the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. For the artisans, Shakespeare drew on his own memories of yokels and craftsmen he had known at Stratford or observed in London. Their humor is the robust humor that comes from intimate contact with simple folk, and could only be developed in the mind of one who had observed closely the people who make up the population of the small town and the countryside.

A Midsummer Night's Dream had evidently been popular ever since it was written, beginning with the notation on the page of the 1600 First Quarto that it had been "sundry times publicly acted." Samuel Pepys saw it at the King's Theatre in 1662 (declaring it "the most insipid ridiculous play I ever saw in my life"), and various adaptations and performances are noted through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. David Garrick, for example, put on a version at Drury Lane that left out the artisans, who violated his sense of decorum and propriety. One spectacular performance occurred in 1930, when Max Reinhard staged a performance in the Hollywood Bowl with three hundred wedding guests carrying lighted torches, and thousands of blue lights signifying fairies glowing and flickering. The poetry of Shakespeare was lost in the wilderness of stage effects.

Despite such occasional deviations from good taste, most modern productions retain the spirit of Shakespearean repertory theatres, and today's audiences enjoy a perfectly delightful play, often appreciating it just for the sheer fun of the story. The fairies, the music, the dances, the marvelous lyric poetry, Bottom and his troop of incompetent actors—all make this one of Shakespeare's most delightful offerings, and we can exclaim with Puck, "What fools these mortals be!" realizing that for all of that, the mortals are rather charming beings.

All An Illusion

By Donna Rey Cheney

A Midsummer Night's Dream was the next play Shakespeare wrote after *Romeo and Juliet*, and the plays are as different as tragedy and comedy can be. Scholars who have looked for deep meaning in the *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, have mostly found themselves frustrated. The whole play is comprised of illusion. It was intended as a joyous comedy, most likely to celebrate a court wedding, and the emphasis is fun, with comic elements arising from amazing contrasts. The dualistic world in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place combines alien exotic with English familiar. The combination of plots encompasses elements which are both alluring and frightening, common and mystical, just as dreams usually are.

The action opens with Athenian Duke Theseus and the Amazon Hippolyta dreaming of their marriage which is to be celebrated in just four days. They come from two very different worlds; his is civilized, hers savage. He has defeated her in battle, even injuring her, and is marrying her as a trophy of war. Yet she is content, even eager, for the marriage, intending to dream away the four days till they are wed.

Contrasting sharply to this hope of merriment, indeed, after only twenty lines, an angry parent/daughter tension is set up when Egeus brings the dilemma before the duke. His daughter, Hermia, will not obey him. She wants to choose her own husband out of love, rather than bending to her parent's will. Though the two young men seem much the same in looks and fortune, as Egeus acknowledges, he threatens his daughter with death or eternal virginity if she will not yield. She does what any sensible modern woman would do: runs away with her beloved, from the court to the woods.

The woods represent leaving reality behind. Anything can happen in the woods, both wonderful and awful. The rigid court rules are suspended, and magic reigns. The characters are the same within themselves as they would be in an ordinary world, frightened or brave as the occasion demands, but the mystical setting allows their reactions to be exaggerated. Much of the humor is based on their unexpected reactions.

Hermia and Lysander slip into the woods at night, hoping that with morning's light all can be happily resolved. They had not counted on fairies interfering. In a world of reality, who would?

As Hermia and Lysander wake from their bad dreams, in another section of the woods a group of mechanicals, English common craftsmen, are meeting to rehearse a grossly improper play to present for the duke's wedding celebration. Their dream is simple; they love the money they are certain will be rewarded to them for their excellence. But they have never seen a play and have no idea how to put one on. The mechanicals bear names which are puns on the type of craft they follow. For instance, a bottom is the center spool a weaver's skein of yarn is rolled around for the loom, just as Bottom is the center of their interaction. The mechanicals are English homespun characters trying to be more than they are, reaching into an alien world they don't know.

Yet when Bottom meets the queen of the fairies, he feels at home. He is comfortable with fairies who are named for things familiar to him, Moth and Mustardseed and Cobweb. He is not aware that he bears the head of an ass, a reversal of the man-beast stories of most English folktales in which men keep their human heads when they bear half-beast bodies. Bottom leans back and bids the fairies bring him gifts, till even Titania can no longer stand the sound of his braying. Strangely, this scene is light and fun, not lustful. The wonder is that Titania can love a common ass, even with a velvet muzzle, when she is married to the beautiful king of the fairies. But the quarrels of the fairies are longstanding, since neither is faithful in marriage. Such a different standard for humans and fairies seems normal to all involved.

Balancing against mostly-human Bottom is Puck, a character of dual nature within himself. In English folk lore he is wicked, noted for leading travelers to harm or spirits to rise early from the dead. He even spoils good English beer by stealing the yeast before the liquor can ferment. Sometimes he is called Robin Goodfellow, a cross-your-heart name for the devil himself. But Puck is held in check in the Dream. He is Oberon's messenger, doing as the fairy lord commands, bringing magic potions and interfering with love.

Puck's mischief is mostly accidental, mis-matching the lovers so that in turn the two young men are in love with first Hermia, then Helena, before they get it right. Puck does add an extra turn for Oberon when he turns Bottom to an ass for Titania to fall in love with, but even that situation is righted finally, much to the better. Titania must yield to her lord's leadership because he out-maneuvers her. Puck should have included the fairy folk when he exalted, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

So far we are balancing four plot-lines: the older lovers, Theseus and Hippolyta; the four young lovers and Egeus; the jealous/loving fairies; and the innocent/comic mechanicals, primarily Bottom. In the last act, the playwright adds a fifth story line, the tragic love tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. Strangely, this classical tale fits well into the English world. In fact, the Greek story pulls all the other story-lines together when the lovers and mechanicals join as the Dream moves back to the court to celebrate three weddings and a reconciliation. Through the success of the unwitting burlesque performed by the mechanicals, all quarrels end and everyone is happy.

Finally, fairy magic from the woods intrudes on reality as Oberon and Titania lead their fairy followers into the court to give their blessing. The lovers are promised beautiful, perfect children to perpetuate the joys of the perfect summer night we have shared. We have seen a great deal of "silly stuff" and thoroughly enjoyed, as Puck concludes, a "weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream."

A Genuine Fairy Kingdom

By Stephanie Chidester

Toward the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, William Shakespeare created a pretend fairy world; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare crafted a genuine fairy kingdom, and all those who enter it emerge in some way transformed and enlightened.

Oberon, king of the fairies, directs the transformations in the play; he is the chief arbiter in his magical forest, particularly in matters of love. When he spies Helena pursuing her former suitor through the woods, he pities her and declares, "Ere he do leave this grove, / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek they love" (*The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972], 2.1.245-46). And accordingly, when the lovers leave the forest, Demetrius's affections are once more focused upon Helena.

However, even the king and queen of the fairies are not without love troubles; their first encounter in the play is marked with such comments as Titania's "Why art thou here / . . . But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskined mistress and your warrior love, / To Theseus must be wedded" (2.1.68, 70-72) and Oberon's "How canst thou thus for shame, Titania, / Glance at my credit with Hippolyta, / Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?" (2.1.74-76). In addition, Titania is withholding from Oberon a beautiful changeling boy whom he wants for his court.

Oberon deals with these troubles in much the same way as he does with the mortals': he plans to place a love spell upon Titania; and, while she is engrossed with some monstrous lover, he will ask her for the changeling, and then "all things shall be peace" (3.2.377). The fairy king may occasionally put his own interests above those of all others, but his designs always seem to work out exactly as he intends—happily.

If Oberon is the director of the action, Puck is his chief actor, and one who doesn't mind taking a bit of creative license. He is a spirit who, while generally obedient, thrives on mischief and delights in pranks: while assisting Oberon in his plan for Titania to "wake when some vile thing is near" (2.2.34), Puck changes Bottom's head into that of an ass rather than finding the "cat, or bear, / Pard, or boar" (2.2.30-31) that Oberon suggests for the purpose.

However selfish the motives or means may be, a benevolent objective is invariably achieved. Lysander falls back in love with Hermia, and Demetrius with Helena; Titania relinquishes her changeling boy and resumes peaceful and loving relations with Oberon; and even Bottom, "the shallowest thickskin of that barren sort" (3.2.13), is enlightened by his experience with the fairy queen: he expresses his new (albeit rudimentary) level of awareness, "I have had a most rare vision. . . . 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" (4.1.207-208, 214-17). As Peter Levi explains, "The wood where Oberon is king is one where all travelers get lost, and love is a wood where all travelers get lost, though it may have a happy ending" (*The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988], 138).

To put the finishing touch on this happy ending, all the fairies visit Theseus's palace and end the play with song and dance, just as Bottom and the mechanicals ended their theatrical effort with the Bergomask dance. Oberon, having resolved the present problems, now ensures a joyful future: "To the best bride-bed will we, / Which by us shall blessed be; / And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate. / So shall all the couples three / Ever true in loving be" (5.1.403-410).

Love is "Where It's At"

By Patricia Truxler Coleman

*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 wing'd Cupid painted blind.
(Helena, 1.2.232-35)*

*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.
(Theseus, 5.14-8)*

As Harold C. Goddard has pointed out, “*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is in many respects the lightest and most purely playful of Shakespeare's plays.

Yet it is surpassed by few if any of his early works in its importance for an understanding of the unfolding of his genius” (*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol. 1 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], 74). Here Shakespeare announces overtly for the first time many of the convictions which underlie his earlier works and which will inform his later works: that love is, indeed, a complex matter and has as much potential for disaster as for success; that women, on the whole, are intellectually and morally superior to men in matters of love; and that love is, to borrow a 1960s phrase, “where it's at.”

While, on the surface, this play is just that—pure play—we are given here a view of a universe constructed of many worlds—court, country, and fairy. And we find in this universe that these various worlds at times collide, overlap, and intersect, all in a rich and wonderfully comical way. At the heart of this comedy is the world of love, in all its various dimensions, and the assertion of the necessity of permanence in love. But we also discover what is so characteristic of all seven of the romantic comedies composed between 1595 and 1600: that love, the essential human experience, is to be earned through sheer hard work sprinkled with a little magic and a conviction that harmony in the universe is of fundamental importance.

Exactly how complex an issue love is is demonstrated in the very first scene of this play. Here we find Hermia virtually sentenced to choosing among three alternatives, none of which much appeals to her: she can either wed the man her parent chooses, be a virgin all of her life, or lose her life. Lysander, her faithful lover, laments that “the course of true love never did run smooth,” and Hermia sighs about what “hell [it is] to choose by another's eyes.” Meanwhile, Demetrius, who is Hermia's father's choice for her in marriage, is beloved of Helena. And Helena openly asserts her love for Demetrius who “ere he looked on Hermia's eye, / . . . hail'd down oaths that he was mine.” So we have here something central to all the romantic comedies and to many of the tragedies: that the universe is frequently peopled with insufferable young men, sanctimonious parents, self-contained young women, faithless heroes, faithful heroines, and sudden conversions. And we see that love, for all its promise, holds out always the possibility of disappointment, if not disaster.

But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to be a comedy and not a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*, and, therefore, needs the intervention of other worlds. This intervention comes not only in this play in the form of women who are faithful even to their faithless men, but in the magical world of the fairy kingdom. Still, not everything is easy, especially in matters of love, and the fairy kingdom manages to

create a whole passel of problems before it solves any. Puck is told by Oberon, the king of the fairies, to place a love potion on Demetrius's eyes and that he will know the young man by "his Athenian garb." Of course, the fairies are busy with their own affairs and are operating right outside the city of Athens. Oberon, for all his sophistication, never considers, in his order to Puck, that there may be more than one Athenian in the forest. Naturally Puck puts the potion on the wrong Athenian's eyes, and Lysander awakens in love with Helena.

We may wonder what is to be accomplished by having a young woman—Hermia—suddenly bereft of not one but two lovers and another young woman—Helena—suddenly beloved of two men; but we do not have to look very far. Hermia, in her moral smugness, has one-upped Helena, and not, I think, without some slight sense of glee. Now it is Helena's turn to one-up Hermia, though she does not understand how. Hermia accuses Helena of having won Lysander by "urging her height," thus suggesting that women don't play fair in matters of love. Yet, with the exception of Titania, the queen of the fairies, the women here are (at least morally, if not intellectually) superior to the men: while the men change their minds about whom they love, the women never do.

But we mustn't forget that this play is about worlds within worlds, about conflict, collision, and collusion. That is why we have not just the world of the fairies and the world of the court, but also the world of the country—or, as it has been called, the world of the mechanicals. Here we are introduced to Bottom and company, who propose to stage a play for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding, and not altogether insignificantly for Hermia and Lysander's and Helena and Demetrius' weddings. That they choose to stage a play about the tragedy of love is no accident. These men are aspiring actors who, while well-intentioned, have little sense of social propriety and even less of real love. That Shakespeare chooses to make fun of his crafts—play writing and acting—is, of course no accident. After all, as Jacques reminds us in *As You Like It*, "all the world's a stage." Furthermore, it is a reminder of Shakespeare's attitude toward love, most eloquently expressed by Henry V in his wooing of Kate and by Rosalind in her attachment to Orlando (*As You Like It*); that men have, in fact, died from time to time, and that worms have eaten them, but not for love.

And so we have all the elements for both splendid comedy and intellectual commentary. While it may be very tempting to dismiss this play as nothing but frivolity, it is a very serious mistake. For in this play, Shakespeare anticipates as he never has before what is to occupy his mind for most of the rest of his life: in the infinite scheme of things, what is love to the universe, and, given its importance, how do we arrive at lasting love. We have here the Shakespearean formula for hope in the universe: it begins in love at first sight; it is tested because love must, of necessity, be permanent; and it ends in a commitment which results in rejuvenation of this race.

Oberon tells his fairies after the weddings to roam the households and bless the wedding beds so that ". . . all the couples three / Ever true in loving be; / And the blots of Nature's hand / Shall not in their issue stand." The purpose of love, then, is not just companionship but also rejuvenation of a dying race. And if we do not like the message of the play, Puck is there to remind us that, as the title suggests, this has been but a dream, and "if we [fairy] shadows have offended, / Think but this and all is mended. / That you have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear."

Indeed, here, as in much of Shakespeare, love is "where it's at" because love, lasting love, is the only hope for the restoration and rejuvenation of the species. Is it not interesting that "love can transpose to form and dignity" that which once was "base and vile"? And are we not caught up by Theseus's reminder that this love which transposes is something like a madness? Perhaps what the world needs today, as in Shakespeare's time, is a little less reason and a great deal more madness.

The Force of Imagination

By Ace G. Pilkington

In J. B. Priestley's *Arthurian fantasy, The Thirty-First of June*, an exasperated character asks, "What's imagination? Nobody tells us—at least nobody who has an imagination" ([London: Mandarin, 1961], 14). But, of course, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, somebody with a truly extraordinary imagination has told us a great deal. As Stanley Wells says, "There is a sense in which the entire play is about the power of the imagination: it has been called Shakespeare's *Ars Poetica*" (*Shakespeare: A Life in Drama* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995], 64).

The subject undoubtedly seemed more important to Shakespeare than it sometimes does to us, not only because he was a playwright and an actor and therefore made his art and living from imagination, but also because some Renaissance thinkers gave imagination credit for far greater powers than we usually ascribe to it. One of the best examples of just how large those powers were supposed to be is Montaigne's "Of the Force of Imagination." Montaigne's essay is never (well, hardly ever) mentioned as a source for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it probably should be.

Many scholars have assumed that Shakespeare could have read Montaigne only in John Florio's translation, published approximately eight years after the writing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, Shakespeare and Florio had a number of shared acquaintances and, of course, a shared patron—the Earl of Southampton. Florio's translation was "published in 1603, but circulating in manuscript long before that" (Dennis Kay, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era* [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 155). And there is another very strong possibility: Montaigne's first essays (including the one on imagination) were in print in French by 1580, and Peter Levi declares that in his youth Shakespeare "learned French well" (*The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988], 34). Certainly, Shakespeare used French often enough in his plays, most obviously in *Henry V* but also in *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, and elsewhere. At the very least, "Of the Force of Imagination" can be taken as an indicator of what educated people thought on the subject at the time Shakespeare was writing his play.

Montaigne tells of a man who "was found starke dead upon the scaffold, wounded only by the stroke of imagination" (*Essays Volume One*, translated by John Florio [London: J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1910, reprinted 1935], 92-93). In the light of this, the fear of Bottom and company that their imaginary lion might do real harm seems a little less farfetched (though not much less ludicrous). Montaigne's examples include a man "who dreamed of hornes in his head" and "brought them forth the next morning" (93); women transformed into men; and, interestingly, given Theseus' intense admiration for his hounds, "dogs, who for sorrow of their Masters death are seene to die" (101).

Montaigne argues (appositely for the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) "that the principal credit of visions, of enchantments, and such extraordinary effects, proceedeth from the power of imaginations, working especially in the mindes of the vulgar sort" (94). He also has words that might have been written especially for the young lovers, "Burning youth (although asleepe) is often therewith so possessed and enfolded, that dreaming it doth satisfie and enjoy her amorous desires" (93). In addition, Montaigne gives an example of a man whose "fond doting was in time remedied by another kind of raving," a summary which fits Titania, Lysander, Demetrius, and Oberon, among others.

The end of Shakespeare's play, where Oberon announces, "To the best bride bed will we, / Which by us shall blessed be" (5.1.405-6) may strike modern audiences as a somewhat puzzling ritual, even if we remember that Oberon and Titania have virtually been given the status of pagan gods.

However, one of the powers which Montaigne ascribes to imagination is enlightening here. He

says, "So it is, that by experience we see women to transferre divers markes of their fantasies, unto children they beare in their wombes" (102).

Oberon, king of shadows, and Titania, goddess of the moon, have come to ensure that the perilous realm of dreams is safe for their former lovers, Theseus and Hippolyta, and for those other lovers who have wandered through their magical forest. There will be no nightmares on this midsummer's eve, and, even if there are, when the sunlight returns, it will bring no reminders of bad dreams. Oberon promises, "So shall all the couples three / Ever true in loving be; / And the blots of nature's hand / Shall not in their issue stand" (5.1.409-412).

Harold Bloom declares, "Nothing by Shakespeare before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is its equal, and in some respects nothing by him afterward surpasses it" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], 148). In this play, Shakespeare's imagination, like that of his audience, has been set free. The plot and subplots were largely his own, and he invented and combined them with such wild panache that even while we watch, it is an astonishment to see Celtic fairies, English mechanicals, Greek myths, and courtly lovers skipping to the same delightful music. What better demonstration of the power of imagination could Shakespeare have conjured up than this gorgeous gallimaufry? And yet, there is more to the play than this because it contains the suggestion that dreams and imagination do, in fact, wield the enormous powers that Montaigne believed they did. Not only do poets provide "a local habitation and a name" for airy nothings, they may also shadow forth realities, transform dunderheads, and unite audiences into a shared epiphany of the true glory of the shining world and the startling humans within it.

If this seems too much to claim in the cold light of the approaching millennium, I would point to the words of the American anthropologist and historian of science Loren Eiseley, who argues that it was imagination that first made us human. Man "was becoming something the world had never seen before—a dream animal—living at least partially within a secret universe of his own creation. . . . The unseen gods, the powers behind the world of phenomenal appearance, began to stalk through his dreams" (*The Immense Journey* [New York: Vintage Books, 1959], 120). Or as Shakespeare himself puts it in *The Tempest*, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."

At the very least we may agree with the words that Rafael Sabatini puts into the mouth of a Renaissance prince, "Will you tell me what reality in all the world was not first a dream? Are not all things of human fashioning the fruit of dreams?" (*The Romantic Prince* [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1929], 11). And we might wish that all dreams could bear fruit as perfect as this midsummer vision of Shakespeare's.

Folktales, Myths, and Amazons

By Ace G. Pilkington and Olga A. Pilkington

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play about women defying men. It is also, of course, about many other things, but, nevertheless, this play contains a series of stories where women defy men at almost every level from the marital to the martial, from recalcitrant brides to warring Amazons. For example, Theseus and Hippolyta meet on the battlefield, and their relationship continues to have its conflicts. Oberon and Titania nearly come to blows over her fixation on the changeling child, a mania that Oberon cannot break directly—even with all his magic—but only by replacing one of Titania's obsessions with another. Historically, Hermia refuses to obey her father—or Theseus, come to that. Helena will not accept Demetrius's rejection of her, chasing him down (like another Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*) while she points out that, as a woman, she should not be chasing him at all (particularly in the woods at night). And because this is Shakespeare and comedy, not one of these assertive, argumentative, occasionally armor-bearing females comes to a bad end as a result of her aggression.

Shakespeare set the stage for these battles of the sexes by invoking the old and (by the lights of the Protestant Reformation) destabilizing fertility rituals of Midsummer. As Stephen Greenblatt says, “These folk customs, all firmly rooted in the Midlands, had a significant impact upon Shakespeare's imagination, fashioning his sense of the theater even more than the morality plays. . . . Folk culture is everywhere in his work, in the web of allusions and in the underlying structures. The lovers who meet in the Athenian woods in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are reminiscent of May Day lovers” (Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004], 40). It is not too much to say that Midsummer festivals are about fertility and also about older systems of belief, pagan gods, and less patriarchal social structures. In the words of Harold F. Brooks, “It was in the May-game that the tradition of the ancient fertility cult lived on. The 'observance to May' was 'everybody's pastime': it was at least as much a popular custom as a courtly one. There is a correspondence in the Dream's whole action with the movement of the May game, from the town to the woods and back, bringing home the summer” (Harold F. Brooks ed., *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* [London: Methuen, 1983], lxix). There were such games with their half-forgotten, half-numinous rituals scattered all over Europe. Some of them are especially pertinent to Shakespeare's story. Sir James Frazer found, for example, “that in Sweden the ceremonies associated elsewhere with May Day or Whitsuntide commonly take place at Midsummer.” He also wrote (in 1922) that in “the Swedish province of Blekinge they still choose a Midsummer's Bride” who “selects for herself a Bridegroom” (Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940], 133). Frazer tells of Briancon (Dauphine) where “on May Day the lads wrap up in green leaves a young fellow whose sweetheart has deserted him. . . . He lies down on the ground and feigns to be asleep. Then a girl who likes him, and would marry him, comes and wakes him and raising him up offers him her arm” (Frazer, 133).

Often, the new religion (or the latest version of the new religion as was the case in Elizabethan England) connects such ceremonies and their older gods to the dead and to evil as a way of suppressing them, but folk memories are long, and the stories have within themselves the seeds of their own resurrection. Katharine Briggs points out such forms of suppression and the “close connection” between ghosts, fairies, White Ladies, “the Irish 'Bean Fionn,’” and Guenevere in the Arthurian cycle” (Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977], 430). The rusalka offers an especially clear example of the process. The rusalka survives in Slavic folklore as a water spirit, fertility spirit, fairy, nymph, ghost, or sometimes all of the above. “Weaving flowers into her hair, she was the very picture of eroticism.” Like the supernatural creatures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, “in

early summer . . . the rusalki would leave their homes in the rivers and streams to dance together in the woods and fields (*Forests of the Vampire: Slavic Myth* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003], 66-67). “The rusalka's description shows very handily the inversion which occurs to an important pre-Christian figure with the growing influence of Christianity. What was once sacred becomes profane; what was positive becomes negative.

The rusalka is probably a descendant of Mokosh', the goddess of fertility, bounty, and moisture, and the protectress of women's work and the fate of maidens. Her taming by the cross may reflect just that—the taming of belief in the rusalka as a powerful supernatural figure due to the influence of Christianity” (Philippa Rappaport, “If It Dries Out, It's No Good: Women, Hair, and Rusalki Beliefs,” *SEEFA Journal*, vol.4, no.1 Spring 1999: 55-64).

It is likely that the rusalka is a remnant of an older society in which women were freer to express their sexuality and to disagree with men. The folk beliefs which Shakespeare is invoking also have a strong element of feminine freedom about them. Brides may choose their husbands, goddesses grant fertility and survival, and women succeed as warriors. Interestingly enough in view of his miniaturization of some of his fairies, Shakespeare has worked hard to restore others to their full divine power. Titania is not merely Queen of the Fairies; she is also Diana/Artemis, in the words of Sir James George Frazer, a goddess of “wild beasts, a mistress of woods and hills, of lonely glades and sounding rivers. . . . Diana . . . may be described as a goddess of nature in general and of fertility in particular.” As a goddess of fertility, “it behooved Diana to have a male partner.” Folk beliefs have her coupled with “the priest who bore the title of King of the Wood.” Frazer suggests that “the aim of their union would be to promote the fruitfulness of the earth, of animals, and of mankind” (Frazer, 140-141) all of which is threatened, should “Titania cross her Oberon” (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Wolfgang Clemen ed. [New York: Signet, 1963], 2.1 19). But, of course, the situation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of bad weather to be corrected by the sympathetic magic of a male-female union is exactly what the folk rituals were.

Titania as Diana/Artemis is also an Amazon goddess; a deity who is, as the Amazons were thought to be, both virginal and sexual. Titania's obligations as such a goddess would be with “fairy grace” (4.1 402) to bless the marriage of Theseus and his warrior bride. Hippolyta and Theseus's way to the altar lay through the path of war. Amazons and Hippolyta as their Queen are part of the pre-Christian society where “women hold religious power” and thus possess more freedoms. As Lyn Webster Wilde says, “The Amazons . . . are borderline beings . . . : they are women with the power of women but they express that power in a masculine way” (Lyn Webster Wilde, *On the Trail of the Women Warriors* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000], 105). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare has given us an Amazon goddess, an Amazon Queen, and for good measure, Queen Elizabeth, who was sometimes viewed as an Amazon.

“During her lifetime, Queen Elizabeth was identified with several Amazonian personages, including Diana” (Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard, eds., William Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts* [New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999], 199). So, in the end, in that all-inclusive way of his, Shakespeare took his audience into the mythic past, only to bring them again to their present, where a new myth was being built, and a new woman wielded power.

A Sidelong Glance

By David G. Anderson

Anamorphism is a technique used by contemporary and Renaissance artists. It is a perspectival device that portrays one image when looked at straight on, and another when viewed at an angle. Perhaps the most famous such painting is Holbein's "The Ambassadors." Viewed from straight on, one sees the familiar two Frenchmen with sundry objects between them. Below them is an object that is indistinguishable, a blur that is possibly a grayish painter's pallet on end. If the viewer moves to his right and then glances down and to his left a skull with its empty eyes appears where the grayish blur once was. It is a shock to see such an object but is completely *memento mori*, addressing death with the odd sensation of being-seen-seeing.

According to James L. Calderwood in *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perspective gives clarity and will enhance what is being viewed, "the way Socrates looked at everything, according to Aristophanes, with a 'sidelong glance' that presumably discerned what could not be seen from straight on" (*Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, p. 221).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the lovers in the woods all seem to have a mirror before them. Looking at Lysander we see Demetrius mirrored. The same is true with Hermia and Helena. "This mirror viewing reflects something more general in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, something that calls on both characters and audience to practice a kind of Socratic sidelong glance that might be called the anamorphic gaze" (Calderwood 49).

Anamorphism in a play? "Shakespeare does something similar to Holbein by creating a linear version of anamorphosis, converting the painting into a play which the audience sees from three different perspectives. . . . First he gives us a straight-on look at Athens, then shifts our perspective by obliging us to consider the night in the forest, then brings Athens back in the third panel and says, 'Look again'. The anamorphic effect arises from the fact that fairyland, though not exactly a blurry skull at the base of Theseus' palace, is a kind of crazed mirror of the Athenian world" (Ibid 49-50).

The opening scene reveals Theseus mandating a law which everyone, even Hermia and Lysander, accepts but no one likes with the exception of Egeus, Hermia's parent. This is what Pascal calls the "Mystic basis of authority, the fact that authority is often honored simply because it exists, and continues to exist simply because it is honored (*Pascal's Pensees* 67). Thus, Hermia must marry Demetrius, face death, or join the nunnery. Of course, the practical application of this pronouncement is that most of the cast must venture into the forest of Athens.

So how does Theseus unconditionally cast aside this law in act 4? He tosses aside his first ruling with surprising ease, "Egeus, I will overbear your will" (4.1.178). "In freeing Hermia and Lysander from *le nom du pere*, Theseus also frees himself. . . . The name-of-the-father resides in the law itself, and to repudiate the law, if only in a particular instance, is to deny the total dominion . . . and expose it as a self-serving construction of patriarchal culture. To see this however, Theseus must position himself differently, taking a sidelong Socratic glance at the law" (Calderwood 69), a law that was "irrevocable" in scene 1.

A further explanation might be in invoking another anamorphic angle. Let's examine Shakespeare's device of doubling the roles of Theseus and Hippolyta with Oberon and Titania—"Shakespeare's, because this practice, which has become almost automatic . . . issues from the playwright as much as it does from inventive directors" (Ibid 50). "The effect of this doubling is that the actors are visual puns" (Ibid 50). In the opening scene, we accept the actors the director has assigned to play the parts of Theseus and Hippolyta. The stretching of our imaginations occurs when these same actors appear as Oberon and Titania, in the bodies we have mentally assigned to Theseus and Hippolyta.

There are those otherworldly images of their counterparts. Since the actors have memorized the lines for both parts, they automatically have insight to the other character. We learn in act 2 that these four characters have known each other for quite some time.

Oberon : Tarry, rash wanton: am not I thy lord?

Titania: Then I must be thy lady; but I know
When thou hast stolen away from fairy-land,
And in the shape of Corin sat all day,
Playing on pipes of corn and versing love,
To amorous Phyllida. Why art thou here,
Came from the farthest steep of India,
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon
Your buskined mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded? And you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity.

Oberon: How canst thou thus, for shame, Titania
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?
Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigenia, whom thou ravished?
And make him with fair Aegle break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa? (2.1.63–80)

Elliot Krieger provides that sidelong glance rather than the front on view: “The suggestion of an erotic connection between the rulers of the fairy world and the rulers of Athens transforms the fairies into spiritual manifestations of the sexual drives of Theseus and Hippolyta: Titania represents in the realm of the spirit Theseus's physical desire, held in abeyance during the four-day interval before the wedding, for Hippolyta; Oberon represents Hippolyta's desire for Theseus. The destructive jealousy with which Oberon and Titania confront each other replaces, then, the injury, and the actual martial opposition between their two races, with which Theseus ‘wooed’ Hippolyta” (*A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies*, p. 56). ”Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,/ And won thy love doing thee injuries” (1.1.17–18).

The Amazons were known for their ferocity; they would not suckle their sons, and often they were slain at birth to perpetuate the feminine hierarchy. So how does Theseus sleep at night despite Hippolyta's rather tame initial speech? How has she inwardly processed the unpleasantness of Hermia's plight? Is she now questioning her decisions? Theseus takes note for he responds, “Come, my Hippolyta./ What cheer, my love” (1.1.122). Hippolyta keeps the cards close to her vest and remains an enigma to us and Theseus.

A straight on view of the battle over the changeling boy appears when Titania is purposely making Oberon jealous with a possession denied him. Oberon demands the child as a symbol of Titania's submission and love. A sidelong glance, though, portrays something much deeper with Titania. Her tale is of the mother who was a vot'ress from India “But she, being mortal, of that boy did die” (2.1.35). Titania in this instance becomes a stepmother, “but also does what immortals occasionally do, envy humans. . . . Titania's desire focuses on that specific feature of humans that marks their greatest

lack. Creatures that give birth must die” (Calderwood 57). Titania wants to experience all of motherhood, pregnancy included.

An examination of kings, fairyland kings included, shows that they are very adept at commanding, demanding, reprimanding, and sometimes even forgiving. The quality of mercy within Oberon is in inverse proportion to humiliating Titania. “Still, Titania’s disgrace, reflected in the flouriets’ weeping eyes, moves him to pity; and if pity depends on taking the perspective of others, then Oberon’s own vision has been modified for the better” (Ibid 65). “Her dotage now I do begin to pity” (4.1.45).

When Theseus marked “The best in this kind are but shadows . . . if imagination amend them” (5.1.216–218), he refers to plays and plays immersed in imagination, and perhaps he is anticipating Puck’s “If we shadows have offended” (5.1.418). Imaginably the lovers are a metaphor for Shakespeare’s audiences who secretly desire to revel away the night in the forest of Athens. This play is fantasy, its art is an illusion as we’ve anamorphically experienced, “no more yielding but a dream” (5.1.423). Consider an actor playing Bottom playing the part of Pyramus, being admired by the actor playing Hippolyta. Perchance we have been seen—seeing art that has shadowed the dream world. “It seems to me/That yet we sleep, we dream” (4.1.195).

A Midsummer Night's Dream in Film

Silent Shakespeare (1909)

This collection of seven short films includes British versions of *King John* (1899), *The Tempest* (1908), and *Richard III* (1911); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909) and *Twelfth Night* (1910) from the United States; and Italian productions of *King Lear* (1910) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1910). 88 minutes with music score.

Cast: Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Frank R. Benson, James Berry, Francesca Bertini, Alfred Brydone, Benson Constance, Maurice Costello, Olga Giannini Novelli, Gladys Hulette, Charles Kent, Clara Kimball Young, Erneste Novelli, William V. Ranous, and Julia Swayne Gordon.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1935)

An all-star cast is featured in this Hollywood recreation of Shakespeare's timeless comedy. James Cagney, Dick Powell, Olivia de Havilland, and Jean Muir are the star-crossed lovers; Mickey Rooney is the mischievous Puck, and Hugh Herbert, Joe E. Brown and Victor Jory are also featured. Max Reinhardt directs. 150 minutes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1968)

Diana Rigg, David Warner, Ian Richardson, Judi Dench, and Ian Holm star in Shakespeare's farce, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Mismatched lovers, supernatural beings, and some hearty belly laughs make up this classic film. 124 minutes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1996)

Originally produced for British television, this lush and lyrical rendition of the Bard's romantic fantasy features fine performances by a Royal Shakespeare Company cast that includes Lindsay Duncan as Hippolyta and Titania, Alex Jennings as Theseus and Oberon, Desmond Barrit as Bottom, and Barry Lynch as Puck. 103 minutes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1999)

Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Rupert Everett, Calista Flockhart, Stanley Tucci, Anna Friel, Dominic West, Christian Bale, Sophie Marceau, and David Strathairn star in this film directed by Michael Hoffman. 116 minutes.

William Shakespeare: A Bio

1564-1616

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England on April 23, 1564. His father was John Shakespeare, a well-to-do general storekeeper. Shakespeare went to a good school, very much like yours, except he studied some Latin and Greek and became familiar with Greek and Roman plays and poetry.

We don't know much about his early life, since no one wrote a biography of him while he was alive, but we do know that he married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was eighteen, and that they had three children: Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith. Nothing is known of why he decided to go to London, but the next mention we have of him is in 1594, when he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's men, a professional acting company. Through looking at some of the records of the theatre, we can find out that his first play was probably *The Comedy of Errors*, written in 1591, and that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written probably between 1594 and 1596.

Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. His only son, Hamnet, had died at the age of eleven, and his wife died seven years after her son's death. Although his two daughters married and had children, the line died out, so there aren't any descendants of Shakespeare alive today.

What are still alive are his plays, which are still being performed after almost 400 years, in countries all over the world—in German, French, Russian, and Japanese. Every ten years or so, the film industry "rediscovers" Shakespeare and makes lavish movies of some of his most famous plays.

Michael Hoffman directed a film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1999, which starred Kevin Kline as Bottom, Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania, and Rupert Everett as Oberon. The text of the play is stripped down a bit in the production, but the reactions and responses of the characters have helped to portray the missing lines.

Question: Can you name some of Shakespeare's plays which have been made into movies recently and some famous actors in them?

Answer: Hamlet with Kenneth Branagh; another Hamlet with Mel Gibson; Richard III with Ian McKellen; Twelfth Night with Nigel Hawthorne, Much Ado about Nothing with Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, and Michael Keaton; Henry V with Kenneth Branagh; Romeo and Juliet with Clare Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio; Othello with Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh; Love's Labour's Lost with Alicia Silverstone, Nathan Lane, and Kenneth Branagh; and The Merchant of Venice with Al Pacino and Jeremy Irons.

Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words

By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his *General Introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (*Othello*, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).

Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full

advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare's vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. "In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing" (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare's vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which "have dropped from common use like 'bisson' (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as 'conspicuities' (eyesight or vision) or 'unplausible' (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as 'proper' (handsome), 'nice' (squeamish or delicate), 'silly' (innocent), or 'cousin' (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle)" (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses 'conceit,' he does not mean 'vanity,' as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a 'conception' or 'notion,' or possibly the 'imagination' itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words "would have been strange to Shakespeare's audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: 'auspicious,' 'assassination,' 'disgraceful,' 'dwindle,' 'savagery.'" Certainly a brave soul, he was "a most audacious inventor of words." To appreciate and understand Shakespeare's English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the "process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning" (Levin 8).

Shakespeare's vocabulary has received greater attention than any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare's language will forever be challenging and captivating.

Not of An Age, But for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare's Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London's south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky.. There the "groundlings" may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience "Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowdes with the Steames of strong breath" (Shakespeare's Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City's own Utah Shakespeare Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else--what single individual--could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare's perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare's lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, "Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations." She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more "quotations" to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare's character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in *Much Ado about Nothing* in her advice to her cousin about choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say "Father, as it please me." *Coriolanus* presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man's attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in *Othello*, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the "Moor," are always aware of his difference.

London's new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays' continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not "of an age" but "for all time."

Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume

By Diana Major Spencer

Could the plays known as Shakespeare's have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled his name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry V*? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create *King Lear* and *Macbeth*?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is "The Shakespeare Controversy."

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the "real author" have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford--among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name "Shakespeare"--in one of its spellings--appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school--in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton's? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name "Shakespeare" could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the "facts" of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford--if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn't Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one's own life. "The Controversy" was laid to rest--temporarily, at least--by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!

Shakespearean Snapshots

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582-83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare's career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It's hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare's life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare's youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare's birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—"upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes" (Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, "The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs's house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (*The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford's elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. "We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare's road to London" (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare's road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth's words, "Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns" (*Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre* [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.

In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. "Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: 'flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh', according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames" (Garry O'Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Popular Life* [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan "drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day" (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare's London, "The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination" (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls "the most powerful and influential intellect of his time" (*Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been "one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture" in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, "who broke under torture and was never the same again," and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Raleigh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare's life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.

Shakespeare's Audience and Audiences Today

Seating

Shakespeare's audience for his outdoor plays was the very rich, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class. The lower middle class paid a penny for admittance to the yard (like the yard outside a school building), where they stood on the ground, with the stage more or less at eye level—these spectators were called groundlings. The rich paid two pennies for entrance to the galleries, covered seating at the sides. The rich paid three pennies to sit in the higher galleries, which had a better view. The best seats were in the lords' rooms, private galleries closest to the stage.

How Much Did It Cost?

To get an idea of the cost of a ticket in today's terms, consider that the average blue collar worker earned five to six pennies a day; bread for his midday meal cost a penny, ale cost another penny, and if he were lucky enough to have chicken for dinner, it cost two pennies. His rent was often a shilling (twelve pennies) a week, so there wasn't much money left over for playgoing, nor would he have been able to take time off from work to go and see a play in the middle of the day, when they were usually performed.

Activity: Ask the students to set the space with room to sit on the floor (for the one penny seats), a semi-circle of chairs on the floor (for two-penny seats), and tables behind the chairs for three-penny seats. Depending on the size of the class, a second rank of tables with chairs on them may be set up as lords' rooms.

Before the students decode what seating area they wish to be in, have them "cost out the price of a ticket, using their allowances or earnings as a base for comparison with Elizabethan ticket prices and deducting amounts for rent and food.

Example: A student gets an allowance of \$5 a week. He gets 500 pennies, as compared to the Elizabethan worker's 36 pennies per week. Therefore, 14 of the student's pennies equal one of the worker's pennies. From his weekly allowance he must deduct his food and lodging, which would be 33 pennies Elizabethan (12 pennies for lodging and 3 pennies times 7 days for food). The worker has 3 pennies left for entertainment or extra chicken or ale. Let the student work out how much he has left for entertainment, and whether he will see one play with a very comfortable seat, or several, standing in the yard.

How Was Seeing a Play in Shakespeare's Time Different from Seeing a Play Today?

Shakespeare's audience was perhaps not as well behaved as you are. Since the play was so long, people would leave their seats and go looking for food to eat and ale to drink during the performance, or perhaps go visit with their friends. Some playgoers, especially those who had saved up money to come and see the play, were extremely annoyed if they were unable to hear the actors and would tell rowdy audience members to quiet down.

Later in Shakespeare's career, his acting company was invited to perform in noble houses and royal courts; the audience there was a good deal more polite and focused on the play as you do.

Today's Audience

Today, you have a lot of entertainment to choose from, not including the ones you provide yourselves, such as sports or putting on your own shows. Today's audiences can choose television, movies, or stage shows, and there is a different kind of behavior that is right for each one.

Television audiences are the most casual; they don't have to dress up, they don't have reserved seats, and they can talk or go to the fridge whenever they want.

Movie audiences sometimes think they're at home. Have you ever been annoyed by someone who sat behind you and kicked your chair or talked loudly so you couldn't hear the movie? And you paid good money to go and see it, too! Then there are the people who can't decide where to sit, and keep getting up in front of you so you can't see the screen. What other behaviors have you seen which ruin your enjoyment?

People who go and see theatre (like you) usually pay more for a ticket than they would for a movie, and are most often annoyed by any disturbance. A theatre performance is not something you put on tape and play back on your VCR—it's like seeing a basketball game live—there aren't any instant replays. It requires your full attention, and you don't want to be interrupted by other people talking and moving.

The actors who put on a show for you also want your attention—they've worked for a long time to develop a good production, and you can see them concentrating extremely hard to get the best meanings out of all they have to say and do. If you've seen any golf on television, you know that when the golfer is lining up his shot, even the announcers stop talking. What other situations can you think of where you need quiet and full concentration?

***Activity:** Take a four- or eight-line speech from the play and ask the students to memorize it while you provide some aural distraction (loud music, some of the students talking, you asking questions). Then have them write down what they remember. Take another speech of the same length, provide an environment with no distractions, and ask the students to study it. Then have them write down what they remember. The third method is to have the students study a speech in units of two or three, keeping the groups as far apart as possible, and keeping voices at a low level. This shows that interplay between actors helps memorization.*

Famous Lines and Phrases

"Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth."
Lysander (1.1.132–34)

"I'll put a girdle round the earth
In forty minutes."
Puck (2.1.175–76)

"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine;
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throw her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in."
Oberon (2.1.249–56)

"You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen,
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong.
Come not near the fairy queen."
First Fairy (2.2.9–12)

"Lord what fools these mortals be!"
Puck (3.2.115)

"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."
Bottom (4.1.211–14)

"Not a mouse
Shall disturb this hallow'd house.
I am sent with broom before,
To sweep the dust behind the door."
Puck (5.1.387–90)

"If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb'ed here
While these visions did appear.
Puck (5.1.423–38)

Elementary School Questions and Activities: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

How Big?

Have students make a list of the main fairies and then of the rustics. Ask them to determine which of the fairies are larger when they're by themselves and smaller when they're with the rustics. How can Bottom lie in Titania's lap if she's so much smaller.

Role Playing

Have students discuss or role-play one of the situations that follow:

- A good friend tells you a secret. You want to be friends with another student (same or opposite gender). Would you tell him/her the secret your good friend told you? What would happen to the first friendship?
- Pick four students to be the lovers. Have the boys who play Lysander and Demetrius both tell Helena how wonderful she is (they can be as extravagant as they like). Ask Hermia how she feels; ask the rest of the class what they would tell Hermia to do to get the boys to like her more. Ask Helena how she can help the situation.

Me First . . .

Tell students that they have been hired to perform "Pyramus and Thisbe" before the principal. Decide who should play Pyramus, and who Thisbe. Who would be good as the Wall, Moonshine, or the Lion? Why? Can they arrange the play so everyone has a part? How would they rewrite it?

Do As I Say

Have a group of students be Egeus, and the second group be Hermia. Egeus wants to go on vacation to Disneyland; Hermia wants to stay home and watch television. Have each group prepare arguments, and the rest of the class vote on which arguments are the best. Ask why Egeus is likely to win—best argument, best choice, or because he's the parent?

Do You Believe in Fairies?

Discuss who is the best-behaved fairy—Oberon, Titania, or Puck? Who do they sympathize with? Ask them to think of contemporary equivalents for fairies: Angels? Grandparents? Their own consciences? Do they think the fairies helped the lovers? Or do they think the lovers helped themselves?

Everyone's a Playwright

Have the students discuss what's bad about Pyramus and Thisbe—how do you write a play that's really bad. Encourage them to write a bad play about the lovers or the fairies.

Mirrors

This exercise trains sharing, focus, and physical listening

Description

Divide the students into pairs. Have one of the players in each pair begin to gradually move. The other player mirrors the movements of the first player. Initially one player leads the other, and then they switch. Eventually there is no way to tell which player is leading the exercise. The focus is being shared rather than taken by one player or the other. The object is not to confuse or lose the other player, but to make the reality of the mirror the priority.

Variation One

Have three or more players all mirroring actions in a circle, like a kaleidoscope.

Variation Two

After practice with mirrors, have students move with no one leading or following. Then examine individual pairs and eliminate groups in which one partner is leading or the moves are not mirrors.

Variation Three

Form the class into a large circle. Send one student out of the space, and then assign a group leader. With the leader leading the circle, start a mirror activity. Call the excluded student back to stand in the center of the circle and try to identify the leader.

Relationship to Text

Helping Puck distinguish between the pairs of lovers.

Machines

This exercise is designed to help players work together and develop physical cooperation.

Description

A machine that does not exist is called for and the players create the machine by each adding an essential part. There is no discussion amongst the players before starting. The first player starts with a repetitive activity and an associated noise. The next players add to the machine with some activity that fits into the previous player's activity. This continues until the machine is created. The machine is sped up and slowed down. Certain players can be asked to malfunction, and the whole machine must respond. There is no leader in the creation of the machine. It is important that all the players reflect the change in each part of the machine.

Relationship to Text

The performance of Pyramus and Thisbe

Do You Like Your Neighbors?

Description

Students form a large circle with their chairs. One student stands within the circle, facing a seated student on the opposite side of the circle. The center student asks a seated student, "Do you like your neighbors?" If the seated student replies "Yes." The students seated on either side change seats. If the seated student says "No," two replacements must be named. Then the new neighbors exchange seats with the old ones. During either circumstance, the student in the center of the circle attempts to get a seat. Whoever is left without a seat becomes the new center person.

Relationship to Text

The switching of affections among the four lovers.

Garden of Statues

Description

Students spread out around the room. Choose one or two students to stand outside the large group of students. The large group of students will create various different creative poses, as if they were statues. The two students who were chosen will be "seekers" who will wander among the statues.

As the "seekers" roam between the statues, the frozen students will attempt to create new poses without being caught by the "seekers." If a student is caught the seeker will state their name and say, "I saw you move." When a student is caught they will sit outside of the group of statues. "Seekers" may not touch the other students, but they may talk to them in order to get them to laugh or move. When most of the student statues have been caught moving, choose two new students to become your "seekers."

Relationship to Text

The hidden nature and trickery of the fairies.

Middle and High School Study Questions: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

- 1.) What celebration is approaching at the opening of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? How is this significant, especially as the play unfolds?
- 2.) How is Puck presented when he first appears? What is the meaning of the label attached to him? Do your perceptions of him change over the course of the play?
- 3.) What is the cause of the quarrel between Oberon and Titania? How is it resolved?
- 4.) Describe the rehearsal of the play conducted by the rustics. To what extent are they aware of the humor they generate?
- 5.) What is your first impression of Theseus and Hippolyta? Do they seem rational, heroic, model characters in their attitudes toward love? How do they treat each other? How do they change by the end of play?
- 6.) How does Titania address Bottom when she awakes from her magical sleep? What is the effect?
- 7.) What are Oberon's feelings at seeing Titania's infatuation with Bottom, and what does he do to bring the infatuation to an end?
- 8.) Identify and discuss some of the poetic passages in the play. Why do you think Shakespeare used poetry in this play?
- 9.) How are the play's two locations and thematic contrasts (town/forest, city/country, mortal/fairy, light/moonlight, Theseus/Oberon) suggested by the words of the play? Can you identify other contrasts?
- 10.) If you were to cast this play with present-day actors, whom would you choose to play Theseus? Hippolyta? The lovers? Oberon? Titania? Puck? Bottom? Why?

Middle and High School Study Activities: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Have students work in small groups to create a chart that lists different sources of romantic attraction. Encourage students to be as specific as possible. For example, one column of the chart might list physical attributes, such as sparkling eyes, a delicate complexion, luxurious hair, athleticism, and so on. A second column might list personality characteristics, such as a sense of humor, kindness, intelligence, and so on. Challenge students to go beyond the obvious in their lists. Have each group share its completed chart with the class. Discuss what the charts reveal about the nature of romantic attraction.

Linking to Today: Contemporary Images of Love

Invite students to discuss how romantic love is portrayed in contemporary culture. Encourage them to consider how love is depicted in movies, television shows, commercials, music, and other media. Is love depicted as irrational, or does it have a basis in sound judgment? Is love measured by the excitement it creates or the commitment it elicits? Discuss how popular images of love might influence young people or reflect their own experiences of love.

Dad, You Just Don't Understand

Begin a class discussion by asking students, "Who should decide whom you marry, you or your parents?" Ask them how much influence their parents have on the decision. Should parents have more or less influence? Does the answer vary by ethnicity, culture, and/or gender? Allow students to thoroughly explore the issue. Which characters in the play do they agree with the most about who should decide whom one marries? Why?

It's Different in the Daylight

Have students consider the following questions: To what extent can one believe one's own eyes? What is the nature of reality? In what way is illusion important? What part does imagination play in romance? Why do we need illusions in our life? Encourage them to talk about how they've changed their opinions of people since they were, say, ten years old? Who were their heroes then? Do they remember who they had a crush on? Has that changed, and if so, why?

Status

By Mark Sheppard (adapted from IMPO, Improvisation and the Theatre by Keith Johnstone)

Description

Four students are each given a slip of paper with a number (one, two, three, or four), which they are to keep as a status number. They are not to tell anyone else their number. They are then given a situation in which the group must make a consensus decision, such as choosing a movie to see or video to rent, planning the menu for a party, or selecting one member of the group to run for class office. In pursuing

the objective, each member of the group is to maintain his or her own status number and to determine the status number of the others, without asking or divulging. As the students role play their numbers, the numbers work as following:

1. Always in charge.
2. Participates in leadership, but defers to number one. May offer mediation.
3. Offers suggestions, but not leadership, and defers to number one and number two.
4. May offer suggestions, but always defers to the rest of the group.
5. After the scene is played, ask each player to identify what the status numbers of the others were before divulging their own. Ask audience members if they concur or differ in their perceptions of the status chain of command that they observed.

Variation/Progression

Four students are each told to secretly choose their own status number. Then they are given a scene situation in which the group must make a consensus decision, as suggested above. In pursuing the objective, each member of the group is to maintain his or her own status number and to determine the status number of the others, without asking or divulging. After the scene is played, ask the audience to identify what they perceived as the status chain of command. Then ask each player to identify how he or she perceived the status of their scene partners before divulging their own.

Relationship to Text

Excellent examples of scenes involving status are the opening court and mechanical scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the court scene, Duke Theseus is a definite number one and Egeus a feisty number two. Is Hermia number three? Who are the number fours? Does Helena change from a self-abasing number four in her scene with Hermia and Lysander to a number one or two in her monologue at the end of the scene? In the mechanical scene, Bottom, an amateur actor, insists on being in the number one status position, leaving Peter Quince to take the number two position if he wants to keep the scene moving forward (despite his role as director). Watch Peter Quince attempt to establish his number one status and then shift to number two. While Francis Flute plays at number three, Snug the Joiner, along with Robin Starveling and Snout are clearly number fours.

How Well Do You Know Me?

Description

This activity is a useful getting-to-know-you exercise. Divide the students into pairs and have partners study one another's appearance; then have partners sit back-to-back and each one change three details of his or her appearance; for example the way they wear their hair, how their top is buttoned, which wrist they wear their watch on. When they turn back and face each other, each must try to spot the changes made.

Relationship to Text

Do the lovers love the inner qualities or the appearances? How does Oberon's magic flower (emotion) blur Bottom's reality to Titania?

Ten Second Objects

Description

Divide the students into small groups. Once the students are in groups call out the name of an object. Once the object is called out each group has to make the shape of that object out of their own body shapes, while the leader/teacher counts down from ten to zero. Usually every group will find a different way of forming the object. Examples could be: A car, a clock, a sewing machine, a birthday cake, a ship, and a key—anything you like.

Variation

Groups can also be given a few minutes to devise two objects of their own which the rest of the class then tries to guess.

Relationship to Text

Bottom and his friends, who have to devise their own costumes and scenery, perform Pyramus and Thisbe.

A Midsummer Night's Dream in Modern Terms

Activity: Have the students translate the speech below into their own words, encouraging the use of slang, colloquialisms, or regional jargon.

Helena: How happy some o'er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know.
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities.
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 winged 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 so oft 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 to-morrow night
Pursue her; and for this 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 (1.1.226–251).

Study Guide Questions: Engage With the Play

By Anna Miles

Take charge of your theatre-going experience and make it your own by asking yourself questions before, during, and after watching a play.

Questions to ask before the play:

If you **HAVE** read the play:

How did you envision the set, or the visual world of the play, while reading?

How did you imagine the characters looked while reading the play?

What themes did you notice repeating throughout the play?

What images jumped out at you while reading the play?

How would you describe the central theme of the play in one sentence?

If you **HAVEN'T** read the play:

Do you know anything about the play? If so, what do you know?

In General:

When you think about "theatre," what impressions come to mind? What does "theatre" mean to you?

What do you expect your experience to be when you watch a play? Do you expect to be bored? Excited? Engaged? Curious? Angry? Tired?

Questions to ask after the play:

If you **READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the production set differ from what you had imagined while reading the play? How was it similar? How did these changes affect your understanding of the story?

Did the characters look different from how you envisioned them looking while reading the play? Did they sound different? Act differently? How did these changes affect your understanding and opinion of each character? How did these changes affect your understanding of the overall story?

How did the themes and images you noticed while reading translate to performance? Did the same themes and images jump out at you? Did you notice new ones?

Did this particular production seem to have the same central theme, or a different central theme from the one you discovered while reading? What elements of the staging, acting, or design helped convey the theme?

Did they play gain or lose anything in performance? Did you enjoy reading it more, or watching it?

If you **DIDN'T READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the play live up to your expectations? Did it turn out the way you thought it would? Was your knowledge of the play correct?

Were you able to follow the story?

Which part of the story did you most respond to? What themes and images jumped out at you?

Which character did you most relate to? Why?

In General:

How did this production change or confirm your original impressions of "theatre"?

How did your experience watching the play differ from how you expected it would go?

In your own words, how would you summarize the plot of the play? How is the plot different from the story, or the thematic implications, in the play?

Did you feel the story was relevant to your life? How and why?

Did you feel the story said something about our society, or about the world at large? If so, what?

Do you feel this story is an important one to tell and keep telling? How and why?

What kind of stories do you most respond to?

Theatre Etiquette

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not speak on the phone or text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to the show about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance unless you are encouraged by the performers to participate.
- Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in musical theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors and can cause a mishap. It can also be a violation of an actor's contract.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over... this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great (a standing ovation).
- Do not whistle, stomp your feet, or scream out to the performers except for a Bravo or Brava.

Additional Resources

ArtsEdge

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/>

ArtsEdge offers free, standards-based teaching materials for use in and out of the classroom, as well as professional development resources, student materials, and guidelines for arts-based instruction and assessment.

Utah Shakespeare Festival Education Website

<http://www.bard.org/education.html>

Expand your horizons, your outlook, your understanding with our myriad of educational resources, not just for students, but for students of life.

ProjectExplorer, Ltd.

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

ProjectExplorer, Ltd. is a not-for-profit organization that provides an interactive global learning experience to the kindergarten through twelfth grade community. Providing users globally the opportunity to explore the world from their own computer, it is a free, all-inclusive site that uses story-based learning to spark students' imaginations.

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare

<http://shakespeare.met.edu/>

The web's first edition of the complete works of William Shakespeare. This site has offered Shakespeare's plays and poetry to the internet community since 1993. Downloadable plays are available by scene or in their entirety.

Absolute Shakespeare

<http://absoluteshakespeare.com/>

Absolute Shakespeare provides resources for William Shakespeare's plays, sonnets, poems, quotes, biography and the legendary Globe Theatre. Absolute Shakespeare also offers a review of each character's role in each play including defining quotes and character motivations for all major characters.

Royal Shakespeare Company

<http://www.rsc.org.uk/learning/Learning.aspx>

This site provides resources materials for teachers and students from Royal Shakespeare Company.

Folger Shakespeare Library

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

The Folger Shakespeare Library, located on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., is a world-class research center on Shakespeare and on the early modern age in the West. It is home to the world's largest and finest collection of Shakespeare materials and to major collections of other rare Renaissance books, manuscripts, and works of art.