

---

# UNIT 1 BACKGROUND : PERFORMANCE

---

## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Dating the First Performance
- 1.3 Conditions of Performance
- 1.4 Reading and Performance Texts
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions

---

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

---

We have called Unit 2 “Background” because it is the word used for information that does not seem to have direct relevance to the text being studied. From the Block Introduction, you will know that such information helps us to appreciate the text better, so it is less background than the stuff of the play.

We have concentrated on three points:

- The time when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written because a writer knowingly or unknowingly includes contemporary ideas and events in his writing.
- The constraints under which the plays were written and performed, or “conditions of performance.”
- The difference between performance and reading texts. Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be acted but for a long time they have been treated as plays to be read. This has affected the interpretation of the plays.

---

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Shakespeare lived 400 years ago in England. Elizabeth I was then the queen of England. The conditions he lived in, what interested him and his audience, and even the language were different to what they are now. So different, in fact, that even the ordinary English man or woman finds him “strange.” Shakespeare’s audience, however, would not have found him strange. It shared his interest in current affairs such as the food riots of 1595-96, the power of Queen Elizabeth I over the kinds of plays that were to be performed, and that boys took women’s roles (see 1.4). The difference between reading and performance texts will be discussed in 1.5.

After reading this unit, you will know

- The bases of the arguments among Shakespeare scholars about when the play was written and performed
- The difference in meaning when a play is performed and when it is read
- The playhouse culture of Shakespeare's time

---

## 1.2 DATING THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

---

Why should the date of the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concern us? Largely because the time and occasion tell us what Shakespeare's audience would have found interesting in the play. We will discover the real emphases or important ideas in it rather than inventing our own.

Most Shakespeare scholars agree that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed in the second half of the 1590s, but the exact year is debated. The four questions we will try and answer about the first performance are:

- What time of year was it performed?
- What was the occasion for which it was performed?
- Was Elizabeth I present at this performance?
- Which year was it first performed?

What time of year was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed?

The only certainty about the date of this play is that it was entered in the Stationer's Register in September 1598 as having been performed, but it may have been performed earlier than 1598. Scholars have used different data to determine the date of its first performance. For example, because of "midsummer" in its title, it is possible that the play was performed in summer, perhaps on a special occasion such as the eve of Mayday (Walpurgisnacht) or Midsummer Eve when young men and women would find their life partners and which is therefore associated with eroticism.

What was the occasion for the performance?

For a long time it was accepted that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was an "occasional" play, that is, it was written for a special occasion. Harold Brooks is among those who are convinced that it was performed for an important aristocratic wedding. This explains why the play begins and ends with the wedding of Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta while the main action is about the rest of the characters. It would seem, then, that Theseus and Hippolyta are not really important to the action of play.

The importance of a character, however, does not depend on the length of the role. Sometimes a writer emphasises characters' importance by placing them in significant scenes, such as the first and last scenes. Theseus and Hippolyta appear in the first and last scenes, both of which focus on their wedding. Shakespeare shows us other similarities between these two and the audience that was supposedly gathered for the aristocratic wedding. Like the audience at the first performance, Theseus and Hippolyta are powerful aristocrats. Theseus is Duke of Athens and Hippolyta has been queen of the Amazons. In a further parallel with whatever wedding *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream* is supposed to have been performed for, a play is to be performed to celebrate Theseus' and Hippolyta's wedding.

Many modern critics do not agree that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed for an aristocratic wedding because there is no record of such a wedding in the second half of the 1590s.

Was Queen Elizabeth I present at the first performance?

If *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was indeed performed for an aristocratic wedding, it is likely that Elizabeth I was present. This is generally the explanation for the compliments to Titania, queen of the fairies, and Diana, the virgin goddess of the moon. Elizabeth I was called the Virgin Queen and compared with Diana and Titania.

The argument against this view is that these compliments are not proof that Elizabeth I was present at the first performance. They are routine compliments to the very powerful queen who liked to be admired in this way.

In 1.4 you will see why Shakespeare would compliment Elizabeth I in a play that had nothing to do with her and who was probably not even present at its first performance.

When was the play first performed?

Critics have suggested two seasons: 1594-95 and 1595-96. A current view is that it was most definitely performed in 1596 (see Patterson, *New Casebooks* p.176).

Before going on to the topicality of the play, a brief mention about who comprised the audience for Shakespeare's plays.

It used to be believed that the largest group in the audience was made up of aristocrats and courtiers. Recent research suggests that although special performances were held for the Court, the biggest audiences were of people like the Mechanicals from the poorer strata of society. Shakespeare tried to please both kinds of audience. [See 2.5 for further reading on play going in Shakespeare's time.]

Why should the year of its first performance concern us in the late twentieth century? The information influences our understanding of the play and helps us to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Shakespeare's audience might have seen it.

In Act II of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania have had a serious quarrel, which, Titania says, has upset the normal workings of nature. There has been unusually heavy rain and the crops have been ruined:

...with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.  
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,  
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea  
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,  
Hath every pelting river made proud  
That they have overborne their continents.  
The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,  
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn  
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;  
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,  
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;  
The nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud,

And the quaint mazes in the wanton green  
For lack of tread are undistinguishable,  
The human mortals want their winter cheer;  
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.  
Therefore the moon, the governess of the floods,  
Pale in her anger, washes the air  
That rheumatic diseases do abound.  
And thorough this distemperature we see  
The season alter: hoary-headed frosts  
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;  
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,  
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds  
Is, in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,  
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change  
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,  
By their increase, now knows not which is which.  
And this same progeny of evils comes  
From our debate, from our dissension;  
We are the parents and original. (II i 87-117).

Titania's speech is derived from Seneca, Ovid, and Spenser, but it also had topical interest. England had bad weather from March 1594, which was followed by wet summers in 1595 and 1596 (see Brooks xxxvii, and Patterson *New Casebooks* 176). Grain was scarce, prices rose sharply, and there were food riots. Titania's mention of wet weather and rotting grain would have interested the poorer majority of the audience which was directly affected by rising prices and hunger.

Shakespeare achieved two contradictory goals through the dialogue about bad harvests. First, Titania says that Oberon's rage is responsible for the bad weather, an accusation that seems ridiculous until we realise that Oberon is a fairy king with supernatural powers. Shakespeare's audience would have seen a parallel with their own situation. Unlike Oberon, the mortal Elizabeth I could not be responsible for the bad weather, but she was partially responsible for good government. An uprising in 1596 against bad governance showed that there was indeed dissatisfaction against those in power. The topicality in Titania's speech probably enhanced the play's popularity.

Elizabeth I, however, did not like criticism and had her critics imprisoned or killed. Could Shakespeare, a mere playwright, have dared to criticise her? If he did dare, he was careful to make a fairy king rather than a mortal queen responsible for the bad harvests. There was thus only a hint that he might have had Elizabeth in mind when he wrote this passage. He did not take any chances, however, and had Puck apologise profusely in the Epilogue for any offence the play may have given.

Keeping the majority of the audience and the queen happy may not seem important to us, but in 1.4, you will see how important it was for Shakespeare.

---

### 1.3 CONDITIONS OF PERFORMANCE

---

Historical critics' discoveries about the theatre culture in Shakespeare's time have enriched the plays for us. Here is some information relevant to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- Plays were written and performed by groups of actors known by the names of their patrons, e.g., the Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's company) and

the Admiral's Men (Christopher Marlowe's company). The names usually changed when the patron changed. Patrons did not fund the companies nor protect them in any way. Players and owners were therefore careful not to upset powerful officials and courtiers.

- The government strictly controlled theatres (playhouses) because they were said to cause riots, traffic jams, and plague. Municipal authorities licensed playhouses within the city limits, while the scripts of all plays had to be passed by the Master of Revels, an officer of the royal Court. (Philostrate is Master of Revels in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) Strict censorship is partly why a number of Shakespeare's plays are set in Athens, Venice, Rome, or other places far from England in place and time.
- If a company displeased the authorities, its licence could be revoked and the actors would be without a livelihood. Players therefore tried to keep the authorities happy. We notice this in the Mechanicals' conversation about their play which they are to perform for powerful Athenian aristocrats who are very like Elizabethan courtiers. The Mechanicals are at pains to explain to this audience that their play should not be mistaken for reality:

**Bottom:** There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?

**Snout:** Byrlakin, a parlous fear.

**Starveling:** I believe we must leave the killing out, when all is done.

**Bot:** Not a whit; I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear.

**Quince:** Well, we will have such a prologue; and it shall be written in eight and six. [*i.e., as a Petrarchan sonnet.*]

**Bot:** No, make it two more; let it be written in eight and eight.

**Snout:** Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?

**Bot:** Masters, you ought to consider with yourself; to bring in (God shield us!) a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild-fowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to't.

**Snout:** *Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.*

**Bot:** Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck; and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect: 'Ladies,' or 'Fair Ladies, I would wish you,' or 'I would request you,' or 'I would entreat you, not to fear, nor to tremble: my life for yours! If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am no such thing; I am a man, as other men are': and there, indeed, let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner. (III i 8-44).

There is a strong parallel with Elizabethan players' worry that the least offence would mean a cancelled licence.

- The Chamberlain's Men were well off and owned an octagonal, wooden playhouse called the Globe. Its central portion was without a roof so that natural light could be used for daytime and summer performances. Artificial lighting was used for winter evening performances. The detailed description of moonlight in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were meant to help the audience imagine moonlight while sitting in the bright light of long English summer evenings that last beyond nine o'clock.

[The Globe burnt down early in the early 1600s when its thatched roof caught fire during a performance of *Henry VIII*. A reconstructed Globe with a fireproof thatched roof has been built recently at almost the same place and on the same design.]

- Acting companies had male actors only. Boys acted women's roles. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Francis Flute is an amateur actor and therefore upset that he is to act as a woman:

*Quince:* Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.

*Flute:* What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?

*Quince:* It is a lady that Pyramus must love.

*Flute:* Nay, faith, let me not play a woman: I have a beard coming.  
(I ii 40-46).

- Wealthier members of the audience paid extra to sit on the stage and converse with the actors. The script would be ignored as actors ad libbed in response to the audience, as happens during the Mechanicals' play.

---

## 1.4 READING AND PERFORMANCE TEXTS

---

A major change in interpreting Shakespeare's plays has been from treating them as meant for the stage to seeing them as solely to be read to treating both performance and reading as significant.

Shakespeare was an actor as well as part owner of a drama company. Play writing and acting was how he earned his living. The plays had to be good enough to attract large audiences otherwise Shakespeare and his fellow actors would have starved. From extant (surviving) texts of his plays, we learn that an actor or prompter or manager, to suit a change in actor or audience often changed the plays. In other words, there was no "fixed" or absolutely authentic text.

About 200 years ago, Coleridge suggested that Shakespeare was a poet rather than a dramatist. This was an influential idea. Shakespeare's plays continued to be acted, but a huge number of people simply read them. The plays were taught in schools and universities as poetry and details of the language were analysed. Discussions about how appropriate a word was for a character or situation did not take into consideration that Shakespeare may have changed that word if, for example, the actor could not pronounce it.

In the middle of the twentieth century, departments of Theatre Studies were established in western universities. Here Shakespeare's drama was taught as plays to be performed. Students learned how a director could change the meaning by simply making two actors frown at each other across the stage during a dialogue instead of standing next to each other and smiling while saying exactly the same thing. Philip

C.McGuire has demonstrated this effectively in his essay, "Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen." You will find it in the New Casebooks on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. [See 2.5 for details].

---

## 1.5 LET US SUM UP

---

From relevant "background" information in this unit, you have learnt

- Why it is useful to know when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed
- Whether Elizabeth I was present at the first performance, and
- How uncertain the relationships between characters and the emphases of the play can be when it is performed on the stage, and therefore how different performance and reading texts are.

---

## 1.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. What four questions should we try and answer about the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. What was Shakespeare's playhouse called?
3. What are the three significant points about Theseus and Hippolyta in the opening scene of the play?
4. What does Titania's speech in Act II, scene i, 87-117 have to do with England in the 1590s?
5. Which two non-human characters mentioned in the play was Elizabeth I compared to?
6. What part of the play tells you about the censorship of drama in Shakespeare's time?
7. Why are the descriptions of moonlight so detailed in this play?
8. What are the occasions that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might have been performed at?
9. What is are performance and reading texts?
10. Who said that Shakespeare was a poet rather than a dramatist?
11. What was the function of a Master of the Revels in the time of Elizabeth I?
12. Which two authorities controlled plays and theatres in Elizabethan England?

---

## UNIT 2 ROMANTIC COMEDY AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY

---

### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Romantic Comedy And Shakespeare's Innovations
- 2.3 Language Varieties
- 2.4 Bibliography
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions

---

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The issues elaborated in this unit are

- The Romantic Comedy formula and how Shakespeare's altered it
- The language of the play, its many varieties, and how to use it for dating the play

We have also given you a list of books and journals you may wish to read on this play and on Shakespeare's stage. Most importantly, we have given details of the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that you should try and use.

---

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Generic criticism looks at the form or genre in which a piece of literature is written. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a Romantic Comedy, and in 2.2 we will tell you about the rules of such comedy and how much Shakespeare followed them.

In 2.3, you will first learn of the poetry in the play and how Shakespeare varied it. Then, from the myriad interesting studies of language in Shakespeare's drama, we have chosen the business of dating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by analysing its language.

The second part may seem like an obscure and irrelevant exercise to you but some of you may wish to go on to research or teaching and it will help you to know how meticulously scholars have worked to make the texts of Shakespeare's plays as authentic as possible. Remember, the plays were initially written as performance texts. Prompters, actors, copiers all added and subtracted from them. This is why scholars have tried to discover what they were originally like.

## 2.2 ROMANTIC COMEDY

Romantic Comedy is one of the many kinds of comedy performed on the 16<sup>th</sup> century stage in England, and it has an identifiable formula which is similar to popular Hindi films. In the second half of 2.2 we will consider some of Shakespeare's alterations of the formula.

### The Romantic Comedy Formula:

Romantic Comedy has a main plot and a subplot. In the main plot an eligible aristocratic man and woman fall in love with each other but cannot marry for some reason. They may be socially incompatible or their families may have a long-standing quarrel or it could be that the man or the woman do not even realise they are in love, as is the case with Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Then some external agency like the disclosure of a secret or a trick by others brings the lovers together. Their marriage or intention to marry is celebrated with a dance and/or a feast in which all disharmonious elements are eliminated or made to fit in with the general joy. The presiding deity is Hymen, the God of marriage. In short, although the action focuses on courtship, the play ends in marriage.

The characters of the subplot are from the lower strata of society (servants, constable, Mechanicals) or behave as if they were (Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*). The two major functions of the subplot are to parody the main plot and wittingly or unwittingly sort out the problems of the characters in the main plot. In short, there are points where the main plot and the subplot interact, and at the end, everyone, whether they are aristocrats or not, joins in the celebrations.

The setting for Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy is some place remote and distant from England, such as Messina, Padua, or Athens. This remoteness adds to the fairy-tale quality of the comedy. The action begins in the court but since it is in the court that the lovers' marriage is obstructed, they leave for some place that is close to nature, such as a forest or village or some ideal pastoral setting that encourages love and fertility. Having found fulfilment, they return to the court or city, which is transformed by their joy into a healthier place that no longer stands in the way of love.

The purpose of Romantic Comedy is to emphasise accepted social values. Thus love, which ends in marriage, is allowed, but adulterous or obsessive love is not. Anything that threatens the harmonious functioning of society is gently but firmly eliminated or corrected. But the chief function of Romantic Comedy is to entertain, not correct.

In Shakespeare's use of the Romantic Comedy formula in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we will consider three of his adaptations of the formula.

First, the forest obviously represents the pastoral world which the aristocratic Athenians, Lysander and Hermia, run away to when their love is prevented by Hermia's father and Duke Theseus. But even though Oberon would like to see the right men and women paired together, so much unhappiness occurs in the forest that the Athenians long for Athens. As soon as they return to the court and city, their marriages are fixed as they desire and not as the father or Duke desire. The play ends with a celebration.

Secondly, Shakespeare has not one but two subplots instead of two sets of characters, one aristocratic and the other plebeian, he has three sets of characters. The Fairies are

the additional group but its aristocrats, King Oberon and Queen Titania, seem to defy every value of Romantic Comedy. They quarrel and threaten to live apart even though they are married. Titania quite enjoys her extra-marital affair with Bottom, and she falls in love with an animal headed mortal who is quite below her in status and not even a fairy. Oberon uses deceit to get the Indian boy they are quarrelling over.

And then there is Puck who is not ruled by either Oberon's values or Athenian ones. He simply wants to laugh at everyone's expense and arranges events for his own amusement however much it hurts others. Some critics feel that Puck is like a playwright who can make a tragedy or a comedy out of a situation but remains unmoved himself. They have a point. Had Oberon not been firm with Puck, the play may have ended in sorrow. It is, after all, very much like *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers cannot marry because their families have quarrelled. A friar tries to help them come together but, as with Oberon's efforts to help Lysander and Hermia, things go wrong and *Romeo and Juliet* die. At this point, their Prince orders the two families to make up but the lovers are not alive to see this.

Experiments like this made Shakespeare different to other playwrights of the time. More than that, the serious and comic plays comment on each other, forming a sort of balance between idealism and grim reality.

Finally, we have a false ending on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon and Titania end their quarrel and the three marriages occur in Act IV, not the last Act. Act V is reserved for the Mechanicals' play, and it is here that all three sets of characters are together on the stage. Yet harmony eludes them as the Fairy and Mortal aristocrats comment, sometimes very rudely, on the play, and finally walk away, leaving the Mechanicals behind. It is as if Shakespeare kept some disharmony in as a reminder that real life is not like Romantic Comedy.

---

## 2.3 LANGUAGE

---

The two aspects of the language of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* you will find useful to know more about are its variety of styles and dating the play by using its language as evidence

The variety of styles:

In Shakespeare's time and for a long time after that, drama was called "dramatic poesie" because it was classified as poetry and was written in verse. Like many of his contemporaries, Shakespeare used blank verse which is supposed to be closest to spoken English.

Blank verse is unrhymed verse in iambic pentametre. Poetic lines have a regular rhythm. Each rhythmic unit is called a foot. A rhythmic foot has a fixed number of syllables (and not necessarily whole words). Rhythms vary, and each has a name. An iamb is a rhythmic unit or foot made up of two syllables. The first syllable is unstressed, the second stressed. E.g., "the cow" is an iamb because we emphasise "cow" but not "the" when we speak. A pentametre means that there are five feet of a particular metre to the line. Here is an example of iambic pentametre from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We have divided it into feet:

"O why / rebuke / you him / that loves / you so?" (II ii 43)

Shakespeare varied the blank verse in this play by:

- Changing the length of lines: Shakespeare increased or reduced the number of syllables in a line. Sometimes he used short sentences for speakers at some points, as in the famous quarrel between Hermia and Helena in III ii:

*Hermia.* You juggler! You canker-blossom!

You thief of love! What, have you come by night  
And stol'n my love's heart from him?

*Helena.* Fine, i' faith!

Have you no modesty, no maiden shame,  
No touch of bashfulness? What, will you tear  
Impatient answers from my gentle tongue?  
Fie, fie, you counterfeit! You puppet you! (III ii 282-288; see also I i 194-201).

At other times, Shakespeare shifted from direct information to long, romantic, lyrical passages, as in Act I, sc.i, lines 157-179. Lysander provides information, Hermia is lyrical:

*Lysander.* I have a widow aunt, a dowager  
Of great revenue, and she hath no child\_\_\_\_  
From Athens is her house remote seven leagues\_\_\_\_  
And she respects me as her only son.  
There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee,  
And to that place the sharp Athenian law  
Cannot pursue us. If thou lov'st me then,  
Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night;  
And in the wood, a league without town

...

There will I stay for thee.

*Hermia.* My good Lysander,  
I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest bow,  
By his arrow with the golden head,  
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,  
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,  
And by that fire which burn'd the Carthage queen  
When the false Trojan under sail was seen;  
By all the vows that men have broke  
(In number more than ever women spoke),  
In that same place thou hast appointed me,  
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee.

- Using rhetorical sets: Rhetoric is the theory and practice of spoken or written eloquence, and the art of literary expression. Different kinds of rhetoric are called "sets." Antithesis, for example, is a familiar rhetorical set much used in courtly love sonnets in which lovers repeatedly "burn and freeze." The young lovers' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seem to have read so much of this love poetry that their speeches have been described as being "pestered with antithesis" (Brooks xlii; see also xlv-l for more on rhetorical sets in the play).
- Using internal pauses or caesurae: That is, the pause does not come at the end of the line only but also in the middle of a line.
- By using prose: It used to be said that Shakespeare used prose for his "low" characters and poetry for the rest. This is noticeable in Titania's conversation with Bottom in III i, but it is not always the case. During the Mechanicals' play,

the aristocrats' comments are in prose. This is partly because of rhetorical courtesy (see the section on sestets below). We find a similar exchange in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Leonato answers Dogberry using the same confused numbering of points as Dogberry has used.

- Using rhymed lines: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has over four hundred rhymed lines, the most of any of Shakespeare's plays. These include couplets, variations on the sonnet, doggerel, and songs.

Couplets are used chiefly, but not solely, by the fairies, so much so that it has even been called "fairy language" in some essays on the play. The two variations on the sonnet are the quatrain or four lines rhyming alternately, and the sestet or six lines rhyming ababcc. In III ii 122-133, Lysander addresses Helena in such a sestet, and in the manner of learned courtesy, she replies in the same form:

*Lysander.*                      Why should you think that I woo in scorn?  
Scorn and derision never came in tears.  
Look when I vow, I weep; and vows so born,  
In their nativity all truth appears.  
How can these things in me seem scorn to you,  
Bearing the badge of faith to prove them true?

*Helena.*                      You do advance your cunning more and more.  
When truth kills truth, O devilish-holy fray!  
These vows are Hermia's: will you give her o'er?  
Weigh oath with oath, and you will nothing weigh:  
Your vows to her and me, put in two scales,  
Will even weigh; and both as light as tales.

Notice that both speeches rhyme ababcc. Rhetorical courtesy requires a speaker to reply in the speech style used by the person he or she is responding to.

The Mechanicals' play has a crudely jogging sort of verse called doggerel. Low characters unwittingly parody the use of verse in drama because they do not have the same educational resources as those above them in society. Finally, there are songs in varied verse forms and dance rhythms. In fact, this plays' lyricism is probably why it was set to music by the composer Mendelsohn, and some its most famous productions have emphasised the ballet element at the expense of the dramatic, as, for instance, in the black and white film mentioned in Unit 5.

Dating the play:

Here is a very brief overview of some of Brooks' arguments on how we can date the play through its language.

The great variety of styles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* led the critic John Dover Wilson to argue that it was written at three different times, the earliest being 1592. Brooks, however, says that it was written between 1594 and 1598.

Brooks says that the language serves a dramatic function and is varied to suit the occasion. After Lysander and Hermia have been ordered to separate, one would expect them to be emotionally direct in their speeches, but they speak as if they only know love through what they have read. They are especially funny in Act I, part of which we have already quoted to show how they speak in partial sonnets. Consider this:

*Lysander.*                      How now my love? Why is your cheek so pale?

How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

*Hermia.* Belike for want of rain, which I could well  
Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.

*Lys.* 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;  
But either it was different in the blood—

*Her.* O cross! Too high to be enthrall'd to low.

*Lys.* Or else misgraffed in respect of years—

*Her.* O spite! too old to be engaged to young. (I i 122 f).

And so on. But when *Hermia* and *Helena* quarrel later in the play, they insult each other convincingly because their language is as direct as their emotions (see III ii 282-344). In any case, Brooks says, when we compare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Shakespeare other plays of 1594-98, especially *Richard II* (history play), *Romeo and Juliet* (tragedy), and *Loves Labours Lost* (Romantic Comedy), we notice that whether it was a history, a tragedy, or a comedy, Shakespeare did not restrict himself to any single style of language. *Richard II*, for example, has several long lyrical passages. As in *Richard II*, the rhetoric of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is displayed rather than hidden. In short, it has similarities with the other plays of the same period.

The difference is that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has many more passages of passionate lyricism, not because it is an early play (and) Shakespeare's stylistic immaturity made him overdo the lyricism, but because the decorum of the play permitted it. Stylistic decorum is the fairly strict rule of the kind of language a writer could use for a specific theme, occasion, or character. For example, the high seriousness of tragedy could not be expressed in doggerel, nor could the bawdy language of the Mechanicals' play (see V i 174-175, 186-189, 198) be used by the chief lovers. But exaggerated lyricism was perfectly acceptable in a romantic drama with fairies in it.

---

## 2.5 BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Literature of the past, like history, is interpreted according to the interests and values of successive generations. Shakespeare has probably received more critical attention than any other writer anywhere in the world. As a result, there are many ways of reading his drama. You do not have to know all of these but it is important to know the main ways in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been interpreted. We have given you a three-part list of books and journals that will help you with this.

### 1. The text:

The most widely used and reliable edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is edited by Harold F. Brooks and is in the Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (1979; rpt. London: Routledge, 1989). Its excellent Introduction has information on different texts of the play, its dates, comments on its design, characters, setting, music, and themes. It also has very useful footnotes that elucidate the text as well as excellent appendices.

## 2. Criticism:

The list is not in alphabetic order but in descending order of usefulness.

- Dutton, Richard. Ed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in New Casebooks. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996

[These essays bring you up-to-date with criticism on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They cover historicist, psychoanalytical, feminist, and Marxist criticism. Dutton's lucid introductory remarks on the essays are further clarified by his explanations of the place of the critics in current schools of criticism at the end of each essay. His annotated list of books for further reading is very good but it does not carry information on older basic critical reading.]

- Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1959

[A seminal work. It is now fashionable to use Bakhtin's ideas to analyse the "carnavalesque" in comedy, but Barber was the earliest critic to see the comedies in terms of festivals. Most modern Shakespeare scholars begin their study of Shakespeare's comedies with Barber's book.]

- *Shakespearean and Jacobean Comedy*. Stratford-Upon-Avon series.

[This has essays on Kempe and Armin, comic players in Shakespeare's company who succeeded each other. Shakespeare wrote his comedies with their talents in mind. Critics say this explains why the early comedies differ from the later ones.]

- Andrew Gurr's two books (1970s, 1990s) on the theatre in Shakespeare's time are outstanding.

## 3. Journals:

Academic journals carry the results of the newest research and are therefore necessary to read. The ones in our list are reliable and relatively easy to get because good libraries have them.

- *Shakespeare Survey*

[This is published once every year. Sometimes an issue is on a single play or an aspect of drama. It also carries reports on performances of Shakespeare's plays during the year.]

- *Shakespeare Quarterly*
- *ELH*

[*ELH* is not exclusively a Shakespearean journal but often has excellent articles on Shakespeare's plays.]

---

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

---

You have learnt about Romantic Comedy and how Shakespeare altered it in this play by making the forest less than ideal, and by continuing the disharmony at the end. You have also seen how he used the same plot in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, turning it into a tragedy and a comedy, so that it seems that he deliberately kept in the darker elements of the latter.

You now know about the variety of language styles used and how we can date the play using the evidence of the language. You have seen how Shakespeare varied the blank verse by changing the lengths of lines and by using the caesura and rhyme. You have learnt about other rhymes in the play as well as who uses prose and why. You have also learnt how the language delineates character. For example, although Theseus uses poetry as well as prose, he maintains his status of Duke by using a dignified style and never descends to doggerel. In another instance, Shakespeare emphasises the fairies' non-human status by making them speak mostly in couplets or dance rhythms which are furthest from ordinary human speech.

You have also seen that this play has more passionately lyrical passages than Shakespeare's other plays of 1594-98. This is because of stylistic decorum which permits lyricism in a romantic drama with fairies in it.

---

## 2.7 QUESTIONS

---

1. What is blank verse and why has Shakespeare used it for his drama?
2. How has he varied the blank verse?
3. What rhyme forms did Shakespeare use in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* other than blank verse?
4. Which set of characters speaks mostly in couplets?
5. What is rhetoric and what are rhetorical sets?
6. Pick out six rhetorical sets in the play. Try and identify them.
7. Shakespeare used two aspects of sonnets in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Name them. Give examples.
8. Based on the variety of language styles in the play, what did Dover Wilson infer about the dating of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
9. What three arguments does Harold Brooks give to counter Dover Wilson?
10. What is stylistic decorum? What does it have to do with the extensive lyricism of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
11. How is the lovers' speech different in the grand quarrel scene to what it was earlier in the play?
12. What is the basic plot of Romantic Comedy? Why does it end in feasting or dancing?
13. How did Shakespeare alter the Romantic Comedy formula in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
14. Which of Shakespeare's plays is a tragic version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

---

## UNIT 3 *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* : I

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Athenian Aristocrats
- 3.3 The Lovers Or Court and Country
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Questions

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In this unit, we will concentrate on three readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:  
How stage representations of the opening scene can influence our reading of the rest of the play

The criticism of power and authority in the play

Patterns of contrast and repetition

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The division headings of this unit are misleading. No sensible person today reads drama by breaking it up in to "plot," "theme," or "character." On the other hand, effective learning travels from the known to the unknown, and since many of you have probably been taught to divide characters up for study, we thought we would start with that. Our intention, however, is to see the place of characters in the whole drama.

Any reading of a literary text simply interprets it in a particular way. In other units you have seen historical, linguistic, and generic interpretations, and one introducing you to the festive or celebratory nature of this comedy.

---

### 3.2 THE ATHENIAN ARISTOCRATS

---

We concentrate here on stage representations of the opening scene and their influence on our attitude to the rest of the play.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* starts and virtually ends with the aristocrats. To be exact, it starts with Theseus. How we interpret his relationship with Hippolyta in this scene decides how we will view the relationships of the other lovers. For example, most readers feel that Theseus represents authority, especially patriarchal authority.

We come to this conclusion largely because of what happens in the opening scene which has two episodes: Theseus' announcement of his coming marriage to Hippolyta, and Egeus' demand that his daughter marry Demetrius.

Theseus' announcement of his marriage:

Theseus has just defeated Hippolyta in battle. She was queen of the Amazons, an all-female community. Theseus' conquest of the Amazon queen has been seen by many as an assertion of male authority. He is now to marry her "with pomp, with triumph" (I i 19). He is cheerfully excited, she remains silent. He calls her "my Hippolyta." She does not call him "my Theseus" until Act V when the play is nearly over and harmony has been firmly established.

From Philip C. McGuire's account of five different stage versions of this episode, we summarise two opposing stage versions of the opening scene ("Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen" in *New Casebooks* 139-160).

If Hippolyta remains next to Theseus and smiles through his speeches, then she appears to share his enthusiasm for their impending marriage. Since the play is about love ending in harmonious marriage, the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta in the opening episode becomes the ideal to be learned by the other couples. The audience would have appreciated this. The strongest message in Elizabethan Romantic Comedy was that social hierarchies should be maintained. It was considered natural and proper that a woman should be subordinate to her husband, just as it was natural and proper for a state to be ruled by a male. So, Theseus' subduing Hippolyta first in battle and then in marriage would have seemed proper to Shakespeare's audience.

The opposite interpretation depends on Hippolyta staying grimly apart from Theseus on the stage. If she does, then she obviously does not share his enthusiasm for their marriage. Her lack of enthusiasm is reinforced in III i 102 ff., when they are on a hunt. Theseus wants to show off his hounds. Hippolyta says that she has seen Hercules' hounds, implying that Theseus' hunt cannot match Hercules'. Since the ruler and his bride-to-be have a disharmonious relationship, it follows that their subjects, the young lovers, will imitate them. Only supernatural power like the magic of Oberon is able to bring harmony to Athens, as it does to his own marriage.

In the second interpretation, Oberon is the arbiter of marital happiness. This has exasperated feminists who say that it is unimportant whether Theseus or Oberon is ultimately in charge because both enforce patriarchal order. After all, even though Oberon is not mortal, he is a male and an aristocrat.

The more relevant point is that Oberon wants the Athenian couples to be happy and instructs Puck to ensure this by pouring magic juice into Demetrius' eyes. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, pours the juice into his eyes, and he, seeing Helena instead of Hermia when he awakens, falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Puck has also poured the juice into Demetrius' eyes who also sees Helena when he awakens, and, if we may use the expression, all hell breaks loose. Eventually the magic is reversed in all but Demetrius who remains in love with Helena which was Oberon's intention all along.

In short, disharmony stems from Theseus, spills over into the forest and, in spite of Oberon's excellent intentions, continues for quite some time.

Let us now turn to the second episode of the opening scene. Immediately after Theseus announces his marriage, Egeus bursts in demanding that Theseus enforce Athenian law according to which a daughter is her father's property and she must

obey him. Hermia must marry Demetrius, failing which Theseus must ensure that she dies. Theseus says he cannot change the law, so Hermia must school herself to obey her father. (In the second stage version, Hippolyta has been reading the law book that Egeus brings with him and when Theseus says that he cannot change the law she snaps it shut in anger, making it clear that she respects neither Theseus nor the law of his land.)

Theseus' response is curious on two counts.

First, he offers Hermia two alternatives and not just one as Egeus does. If she disobeys her father, he says, she must *either* die *or* join a nunnery. Why does he suggest a nunnery? It may be that Egeus has not revealed the whole law because after his demand that Hermia must obey him or die as per Athenian law, she asks Theseus what is "The worst that may befall me in this case, / If I refuse to wed Demetrius" (I i 63-64). Theseus replies that it is death or a nunnery for her. But there is a strong suggestion that Theseus has invented the nunnery option on the spot, and that the repeated rebellion against the harshest aspects of the law in this play starts with Theseus. Of course, some may say that being in a nunnery would be a living death, but Hermia herself says that if she cannot marry Lysander, she will not marry anyone. So Theseus' ruling fits in with part of her wishes. Egeus and the law demand death, Theseus encourages life.

After this, Theseus walks out of the room accompanied by everyone except Lysander and Hermia who are free to plan their elopement to a place where Athenian law does not operate. Theseus is either a very absent minded ruler or he is more on the lovers' side than Egeus'. Had he sided with Egeus, he would have seen to it that these two lovers are not left alone. Once more, we get the feeling that the Duke himself has rebelled against the law, this time to allow love to flourish.

Remember, Romantic Comedy celebrates life, love, and fruitfulness. Theseus' response to Egeus foreshadows the end of the play when the lovers will return to weddings and laughter in a rejuvenated Athens which blesses their love.

Having shown us the law as well Athens' potential for rejuvenation, Shakespeare shifts the action to the forest outside the city where Athenian law does not apply. The focus is now on the lovers rather than on Theseus.

---

### 3.3 THE LOVERS, OR TOWN AND COUNTRY

---

Later editors of Shakespeare's drama made the five Act division in modern editions of the play. Shakespeare did not divide his play into Acts, nor did he mark the beginning and end of a scene. A scene ended when there were no more actors on the stage, then a new set of players entered and the next scene began.

We can analyse *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sequentially, that is, as one scene follows another. The sequence of action in Romantic Comedy is from the court or city to a pastoral setting (forest, country) and back to the court or city. The court obstructs true love which flowers in a pastoral ambience. The impediments to love are meanwhile removed and the lovers return to a kinder, more humane court where weddings, feasts, and dances, symbolising harmony, conclude the action. You have learnt about this in Unit 2.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows this sequence but in the next part of this unit we will analyse a pattern of the play, not its sequential action. Unlike a sequence, a pattern is static; it extends over the entire play. For instance, in this play, dramatic

elements seem to come in sets of two. There are two sets of lovers, two rulers, and two men who fall in love with the wrong woman. Patterns impose order on chaos, they order disorder. The rigid patterns of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* control the wildly changing relationships between the characters. The result is like a dance. In a dance, too, the movements are energetic and constant but they are controlled by the discipline of the dance.

We have to decide which pattern we wish to analyse. For this, we will follow the method of structuralism. Structural critics emphasise the binaries in a text. For a structural analysis, we must isolate two opposite ideas or images and group dramatic elements under these. Among the many noticeable binaries in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are light and dark, daylight and moonlight, humans and fairies, aristocrats and artisans.

In order to link together the different kinds of critical readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we have shown you, we have selected the binary of Athens and the forest which is so strong a pattern that it can be represented in two columns, as we have shown. This binary fits in with generic criticism: some characters appear in the court but not in the forest (pastoral area), others in the forest and not in the court, while some bridge the court and pasture. You will see how details of gender and power relations also emerge, and you can imagine that any stage production could use a structural analysis to emphasise relationships between settings and characters.

After reading this section, you should be able to list dramatic elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* according to some other binary classification. For example, you could divide the play according to poetry and prose, or quarrels and dances. Each such exercise will tell you more about the play as well as about Shakespeare's skill in organising his dramatic material.

### Athens

1. Dramatic action in Athens takes place in the Court.
2. Theseus, a mortal, rules.
3. Athenian law is harsh and used to maintain order in society.
4. Lovers are unhappy here. Lysander and Hermia are separated because of a law that Theseus says he cannot alter; Helena is rejected by Demetrius who once made love to her as Lysander reports and Theseus endorses. Theseus says he has wanted to speak to Demetrius about this but it slipped his mind.
5. Athens has a hierarchical, patriarchal social order. The Duke is head of the state, the father of the family, and women are expected to obey them.
6. In Athens, women are not allowed to choose their husbands and they must submit to the men.
7. The Duke endorses couplings at the end of the play. Earlier, though he seems to encourage the Hermia-Lysander relationship, he is not very open about his support, if it is indeed support. Helena's unhappiness is completely ignored by the Athenian court.
8. When Theseus is appealed to as ruler of Athens, he responds as a dignified if slightly absent-minded ruler should. His ducal activities are conducted in public and except for the vagueness of his support for Hermia, nothing is hidden or secret.
9. There seem to be no "natural" families. There are no mothers. The practical reason for this may have been that with only male players, it was easier to have men in the cast. But in the play,

according to Athenian law, fathers are more important than mothers. Hermia has a father and no mother; Helena has a parent but we do not know whether this is her mother or father; the men have no parents apparently.

10. Friendships are important and remembered in a crisis. Hermia and Helena are childhood friends, Lysander and Demetrius are friends.
11. The action takes place in the day.

### **The Forest**

1. The forest represents the pastoral or natural world.
2. Oberon, the fairy king rules.
3. Practical jokes, songs, and quarrels occur but there is no evident law.
4. Oberon wants the human lovers to be happy.
5. The forest seems to be a place of disorder. The king and queen of fairies are married but have quarrelled; while Athenian women must obey their men, queen Titania defies her husband and asserts her right to keep the

Indian boy; lovers literally lose each other in the forest; lovers fall out of love; the Athenian men fall in love with the same woman; the Mechanicals lose their star actor.

6. In the forest, Helena and Hermia fight to keep the men they have chosen to love even when these men do not reciprocate their love.
7. Unhappy lovers do not appeal to King Oberon but he notices Helena's unhappiness straight away and sets about arranging the right pairings.
8. Oberon does not even make a pretence of asserting his authority. He achieves his desire – especially of getting the Indian boy from Titania – by deceit and magic. i.e., in both Athens and the forest, the ruler eventually controls his consort
9. There are no families at all but Titania is foster mother to the Indian boy. Athens has no mothers.
10. There are no friendships between the forest dwellers.
11. The action takes place in the moonlight or in darkness.

The bridges between Athens and the forest are

- The Mechanicals who go from Athens to the forest to rehearse their play; lose Bottom who has a dalliance with a queen, thus bridging a vast social gap; and then return to perform their play in Athens
- Lysander and Hermia who escape from Athens where they are deeply unhappy but the forest makes them unhappy as well. As the horrible night proceeds, they long for daylight and Athens to which they return with relief.
- Theseus and Oberon both eventually control their consorts and events in general.

You will notice, however, that the difference between the binaries is not as absolute as it seems at first glance but that there are more common points than the ones we have listed. For example, the unhappiness of the lovers increases in the forest where Lysander falls out of love with Hermia and although Demetrius falls in love with Helena, she suspects that he is insincere and out to hurt her by declaring he loves her.

---

### 3.4 LET US SUM UP

---

If you know the play as well as you should, these analyses of the play will have been fun to read.

You should now be familiar with some important contemporary ways of reading literature. We have discussed the power structures, gender relations, two stage interpretations, and a binary structure of the play. We hope we have convinced you that no analysis of the play will make much sense if you separate a character or group of characters from the rest of the play.

---

### 3.5 QUESTIONS

---

1. What two interpretations are possible of the opening episode in Act I, sc.i?
2. What is a structural reading of a play?
3. What is the relationship of a father and daughter under Athenian law? Do you think Egeus gives us all the legal information in this matter? What are the two pieces of evidence we have that there may be more to the law?
4. Think about the gender issues in the play. List the many instances of Shakespeare's sympathy for women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
5. Look up the passages that describe the forest. Is there anything in them to suggest that the forest is not entirely beautiful?
6. What, according to Hermia, is the insult Helena repeats again and again during the grand quarrel scene?
7. What is generic criticism?

---

## UNIT 4 *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM: II*

---

### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives and Introduction
- 4.1 The Fairies
- 4.2 Dreams
- 4.3 The Women
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions

---

### 4.0 OBJECTIVES AND INTRODUCTION

---

The chief difficulty in reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or even watching it performed is that it seems in the end to be not one play but several separate strands very tentatively looped together. So in this unit we will take up and study three chief areas of interest:

- The Fairies who live in the forest and interact with the mortals
- The Dreams or visions which take up so much of the enactment time of the play
- The Female Characters, both human and non-human, who give the play much of its ultimately serious tone

In 4.4 we will consider whether these separate strands mesh into a satisfying whole or not.

---

### 4.1 THE FAIRIES

---

The fairies are the unusual characters in the play, forming one of the two subplots. In this section we will look at

- their role in the play
- Puck's characterisation and function

The role of the Fairies:

You might think that a grown and serious writer like Shakespeare must have been slightly mad to write a play with fairies in it for an adult audience. But then in his time nearly everyone believed in the existence of supernatural creatures like fairies, witches, goblins. The three witches of *Macbeth* have been interpreted as symbols,

but Shakespeare's audience must have accepted them as real creatures who predict the future and intensify Macbeth's latent ambition.

Like the witches in *Macbeth*, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are linked with the world of men. For example, when Oberon accuses Titania of having an affair with the mortal Theseus, we realise that mortals and fairies do not remain strictly separate from each other.

In some respects, the fairies are very much like the Athenians. They have a similar social hierarchy. A King and Queen rule them, while some fairies simply fetch and carry for the others and could be seen as the counterparts of the Athenian Mechanicals. In general, however, the fairies fit in with the celebratory air of this play and of the midsummer festival which was supposed to bring visions to young people.

Puck:

Puck is the odd creature. He has abilities that the rest do not have. His special gifts are that he can fly around the earth at great speed and he can execute mischief. And it is for these that he is summoned by Oberon to help him steal the Indian boy from Titania and in the process make a mockery of her for withdrawing her attention and favour from him.

Puck's name is of special interest. For one thing, it sets him apart from Oberon and Titania who have classical names, as well as from the other fairies who are called by the names from nature such as Mustardseed, Peasblossom, and quite delightfully, Cobweb.

He is sometimes called by other names, particularly Robin Goodfellow. Robin Goodfellow is an English folk character who is a genuinely good fellow. He helps hard worked housewives complete their tasks, he helps butter set and so on.

But he is also, without warning and for no reason that human beings can understand, maliciously mischievous. For example, when an old woman prepares to settle down on a stool, he pushes the stool away so that she falls down and hurts her rear end. He can also make milk turn sour and prevent the butter from setting. And he does so for no very sinister reason. He is not instructed by the devil or some evil spirit but does these nasty things for his own amusement. Here is what we learn from a conversation between Puck and a Fairy:

*Fairy.*            Either I mistake your shape and making quite,  
                     Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite  
                     Call'd Robin Goodfellow. Are you not he  
                     That frights the maids out of their villagery,  
                     Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,  
                     And bootless make the housewife churn,  
                     And sometimes make the drink to bear no barm,  
                     Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?  
                     Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,  
                     You do their work, and they have good luck.  
                     Are you not he?

*Puck.*            Thou speak'st aright;  
                     I am that merry wanderer of the night.  
                     I jest to Oberon, and make him smile  
                     When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,  
                     Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;  
                     And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl

In very likeness of a roasted crab,  
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob,  
And on her wither'd dewlap pour the ale.  
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;  
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,  
And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;  
And then the whole quire hold their hi p s and loffe  
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear  
A merrier hour was never wasted there. (II i 32-57).

Shakespeare used both the good and the bad aspects of the Robin Goodfellow folk tales in his dramatisation of Puck. We can see this in the havoc Puck creates among the young Athenian aristocrats with the love potion.

When Oberon tells Puck to put the love juice in the eyes of Demetrius so that he may fall in love with the unhappy Helena, Puck makes a genuine mistake and pours the juice into Lysander's eyes. Having done so and seen the resultant confusion, Puck simply laughs. The unhappiness of the two Athenian women does not move him to correct his mistake. Yet when Oberon scolds him, he does make the correction, ensuring at the same time that corrective juice is poured into Lysander's eyes but not into Demetrius' so that the right couples are married in the end. And he explains to Oberon that he did not plan the mischief but mistook Lysander for Demetrius because they were dressed alike. The entire sequence shows his malicious as well as good side.

But the important and revealing aspect of the fairies' attitude towards the Athenians is that Puck cannot distinguish one Athenian from the other. They all appear to him much alike. One of the "truths" Shakespeare seems to be hinting at is that lovers think their individuality is important while the reader / audience can see that there is in fact very little to distinguish them, to show the difference between them.

But before we look at Puck's view of the other characters, we need to understand Puck's own place in the hierarchy of the forest. Puck's relationship with Oberon provides the tension between the fun-filled, mischievous side of the fairy world and its darker, more threatening aspect.

In the lighter vein, of course, Puck is Oberon's court jester who changes shape and mimics sounds to make Oberon laugh. But Puck's ability to change shape, and to make others (notably Nick Bottom) change shape has a potential for unpleasant, darker mischief. He confesses that his purpose is to frighten people by creating illusions in the forest, and to drive Lysander and Demetrius "astray."

Oberon represents the happier side of the fairy world, and does his best to hold Puck in check. For instance, he seriously rebukes Puck when he finds that the latter has mistakenly (though we suspect it is not really a mistake) applied the love juice to the wrong persons.

---

## 4.2 THE DREAMS

---

There is much play on "dream" in this drama. To begin with, we have "dream" in the title. It is not just any dream that is mentioned here but a midsummer night's dream. Midsummer was a festive time with many associated pre-Christian ceremonies. One of these was a belief that if a young virgin spent the night in the forest, she would have a vision or dream of the man she would marry. Of course, it was also a time

when sexual games between young men and women occurred in the forests without any social censure being attached. The title of the play would have led the audience to anticipate some its action. Shakespeare in fact draws attention to the connection between dreams and his play:

...as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing  
A local habitation and name. (V i 14-17).

Dreams occur at significant moments of the play. We will consider two of its dreams.

First, there is Hermia's dream that a serpent is eating her heart, and she calls to Lysander for help. When she wakes up, Lysander is not there at all, and she convinces herself that she was dreaming that she dreamt any such dream. None of this multiple illusion hides the fact that Lysander has abandoned her for Helena. The dream is like the forest which intensifies horrid things that otherwise hover in the air.

For instance, Helena and Hermia have been friends since they were children and there is no hint of a rupture in their friendship. Of course, Hermia's father wants Demetrius to marry Hermia whereas Helena is in love with Demetrius, but even this does not strain their friendship. It is only in the forest that they quarrel and come close to blows, the only time in any Shakespeare play that women come so close to physical violence against each other. In something similar, Hermia's dream presages the separation between her and Lysander. She is as frightened by the serpent as she is by Lysander's betrayal.

The other dream is Bottom's dream, one he claims to have had when Puck's spell is lifted from him. In fact, of course, he remembers actual events as a dream, and it in this supposed dream that he sees the possibility of cutting across social barriers and having a relationship with a queen, but he decides not to tell it to anyone. After all, Romantic Comedy never rocks the social boat but maintains social hierarchies.

Both dreams have been much commented on by critics, as you will see when you read the New Casebook essays on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These dreams have been especially tempting for psychoanalytical critics. For example, some of them claim that the serpent in Hermia's dream represents the male genital organ and Hermia expresses fear of sexuality when she is frightened by it. (See Holland *New Casebooks* 61-83).

Psychoanalysis is a form of mental therapy that investigates the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Psychoanalytical criticism uses the methods of psychoanalysis and applies them to literature. Its aim is to uncover the unconscious motivations of the author as well as of the characters. Its assumption is that the covert meaning is what the work is really "about" and should be distinguished from the overt content. Lastly, psychoanalytical critics believe that the area of drama or interplay or action is at the individual psychological level, and that the social aspects such as class conflicts are of comparatively less importance. They "privilege" or highlight individual subjectivity.

We will now consider a small part of a Freudian interpretation. Freud is considered to be the man who began psychoanalysis. He argued that sometimes a wish that is frustrated in real life can be satisfied by an imaginary wish-fulfilment. According to him, all dreams, even frightening nightmares are the fulfilment of such wishes, but in disguise. The reason for the need for disguise is that desires sometimes come face to

face with social prohibitions, with things that society does not permit, and in dreams there is a veil over their real meaning. They defy logic.

The dreams we witness in the play operate cathartically upon the characters, providing a form of therapy whereby each one can discard his or her obsession. If this interpretation seems to follow the work of the psychoanalyst Freud it is because the moonlit forest seems an obvious and fitting symbol for the creative unconscious. And keeping with the Freudian view of dreams, once the dream vision is over, it leaves each character with a greater perception of others and a greater insight into themselves.

For the Athenian lovers, the journey into the forest takes them into a world that is part dream and part reality. Reality itself is continually questioned in that a character such as Oberon can be seen by the audience but not by the Athenian lovers, whereas Bottom as an ass appears very clearly to the audience as something quite different to Titania's vision of him.

---

### 4.3 THE WOMEN

---

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is full of confusion as it hovers between sleep and dreaming, and characters change their minds for no known reason. The women in the play are the still centre of the storm; they provide stability. This is evident in all the sets of lovers: the young Athenians, Titania and Oberon, and Theseus and Hippolyta.

Hermia and Helena never waver in their commitments to the men they love even as they try and cope with the devastating changes of heart in these men. In contrast, Lysander and Demetrius respond to Puck's mistaken application of the love juice by switching from rivalry over one girl to rivalry over the other girl. Nothing essential changes in their attitude of confrontation towards each other, making the objects of their love almost irrelevant. Meanwhile, Oberon and Titania too are locked in rivalry over yet another love-object, in this case, the young Indian changeling child in Titania's charge. Finally, we have Hippolyta and Theseus, once rivals and warrior enemies but who have now put their quarrel behind them. This gives Hippolyta, the more introspective and far-sighted partner, the ability to find "music" even in "discord" (IV i 114-18).

The relationship between Helena and Hermia is characterised by sisterhood, to the extent that they see themselves as a "double-cherry." A similar relationship existed between Titania and the mother of the Indian boy, vividly described in II i 123-37:

His mother was a votress of my order;  
And in the spiced Indian air, by night,  
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side;  
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,  
Marking th'embarked traders on the flood:  
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive  
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;  
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait  
Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),  
Would imitate, and sail upon the land  
To fetch me trifle, and return again  
As from a voyage rich with merchandise.  
But she, being mortal, of that boy;  
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;  
And for her sake I will no part with him. (II i 123-137).

This is the reason she has taken him over as her own child, and is emphatic that “the fairy land buys not the child of me.” Oberon, however, feeling that in this new-found love she has deserted him, decides he too will now desert her.

*A Midsummer Night's  
Dream: II*

---

## 4.4 LET US SUM UP

---

We see that wisdom emerges out of the folly and mockery that prevails at every level of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lysander and Demetrius learn to distinguish between infatuation and true love, and Titania learns to relinquish what she loves (the Indian boy) to elicit once again tenderness and love from her husband. This wisdom expresses itself as the rejoicing at the end of the play. The “rules” of Romantic comedy demand such ideals be celebrated at the end of the play.

---

## 4.5 QUESTIONS

---

1. What is the significance of “dream” in the title of the play?
2. What is the common factor between Hermia’s dream and the forest?
3. In what ways can the women in the play be seen as a group with common qualities? Why do you think did Shakespeare make them like this?
4. What do dreams and the play have in common?
5. What lesson, if any, is communicated in Titania’s giving up the Indian boy to her husband?

---

## UNIT 5 THE MECHANICALS

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Identities Of The Mechanicals
- 5.2 The Mechanicals And The Forest
- 5.3 The Play-Within-The-Play
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Questions

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The question “Who are the Mechanicals?” raises two questions:

- Why did Shakespeare include the Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
- Does the Mechanicals play increase our understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Shakespeare's England?

We will break up answers to these questions into the Mechanicals' many identities, why they are in the forest, and their play about Pyramus and Thisbe.

---

### 5.1 IDENTITIES OF THE MECHANICALS

---

The Mechanicals appear in Act I, sc.ii when they discuss the play they will perform at Theseus' wedding. The first Act of a play introduces important characters and their relationships. By introducing the Mechanicals after the Aristocrats, Shakespeare dramatises the social hierarchy in Athens. The Mechanicals are inferior so they appear last. They rehearse their play in Act III, sc.i. during which Bottom vanishes and Titania falls in love with him. This is the first interaction between two social strata. Bottom returns to his friends in Act IV, sc.ii. They are relieved that their play can take place now. This is one of the many moments when harmony returns to the play. The Mechanicals finally enact their play in Act V after the triple wedding of the aristocrats.

A Romantic Comedy usually ends with weddings of the lords and ladies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the lords and ladies are married in Act IV. Shakespeare's play and the Mechanicals' play end almost simultaneously in Act V, as if Shakespeare were respecting them for being fellow theatre people. After Theseus' discourteous comments on their play, Shakespeare is very courteous towards the Mechanicals. In short, though they are often comic, Shakespeare sympathises with them.

The Mechanicals comprise the fourth group of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Their difference from the rest of the mortals in the play is marked in the following ways:

- The Mechanicals are at the bottom of the social ladder.
- Some of their names suggest their poor economic condition, e.g., "Starveling." According to Brooks' footnote to the *Dramatis Personae*, tailors were proverbially weak and thin. Another critic adds that Starveling's name is an almost literal description of someone suffering from acute hunger. In 1596, the time this play is said to have been first performed, this hunger was compounded by shortage of food and high prices.
- The Mechanicals are the only characters who have dual roles. They are defined by their professions as well as by their roles in the *Pyramus-Thisbe* play. (Brooks points out that their names are suited to their professions.)
- The Mechanicals are the only characters with distinctly English names. One could say that this is their national identity. We have seen that Shakespeare's audience was largely from the same class as the Mechanicals and would have identified more readily with English names and professions than with Athenian ones. It is possible that Shakespeare included the Mechanicals to appeal to this largest section of his audience.
- The Mechanicals as amateur actors are also more English than Athenian. In Elizabethan England, actors often travelled from village to village performing on makeshift stages. We notice a reference to this in Puck's description of the players in as "rude mechanicals, / That work for bread upon Athenian stalls" (II ii 9-10). Athenian drama, in contrast, was enacted in amphitheatres that still exist because they were so well made.
- Bottom the weaver is the most outstanding Mechanical. He is chosen to be *Pyramus*; an ass's head is magically placed on his head; queen Titania falls in love with him; he is the most talkative of the Mechanicals who advises Quince the director on the script and performance; he wants to act every part in their play (see Act I sc.i); he is loved by all the Mechanicals who feel they cannot enact their play if he is absent; his speech is richest in absurd language; he is never embarrassed even when he is with Dukes and queens; and he is the only Mechanical to soliloquise, that is, to talk when he is alone on the stage (IV i 199-217). The most valid reason given by scholars for why Bottom is made more important than the other Mechanicals is that the part was written specially for William Kempe an outstanding comic actor. Many in the audience came especially to see Kempe. There is no equivalent role for a particular actor among the other characters.
- Another interesting possibility is that apart from the food riots in 1596, there was an uprising of artisans against misgovernance. Weavers were prominent among them. Though the uprising was harshly suppressed, it did challenge government authority. In a mild parallel, when queen Titania falls in love with a weaver (Bottom) she ignores her husband the fairy king. Thus the weaver, however unwittingly, challenges the authority of the king, whereas the aristocrats uphold the law.

---

## 5.2 THE MECHANICALS AND THE FOREST

---

Why are the Mechanicals in the forest? Here are three reasons in ascending order of importance.

- Disorder as well as magical things are possible in the forest. Most of these magical happenings create comic confusion. For instance, mixing of socially unequal groups is not possible in Athens but does take place in the forest. One result is that Titania falls in love with a Mechanical. The ass's head on Bottom is simply Puck's mad addition to Oberon's basic plot which is to make Titania in love with a socially unsuitable person. This is meant to be comic.
- The forest trees, bushes and undergrowth contribute to the confusion, especially at night. People get lost in them and separated from their friends and loved ones. Bottom's separation from the other Mechanicals is a major confusion of the play. It also makes possible the comedy of a queen falling in love with a weaver.
- Chiefly, the Mechanicals are in the forest so that they can rehearse their play without fear of anyone stealing their ideas, or so says Quince. The play is so absurd that no one is likely to want to steal it. Nevertheless, Quince's comment reminds us that there was a lot of competition among playwrights for ideas for new plays. Playwrights, Shakespeare among them, cheerfully stole ideas from all sorts of places – ancient literature, folk tales, and each other.

---

### 5.3 THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY

---

The two issues here are

- What is the Mechanicals' play about?
- Why did Shakespeare use the play-within-the-play?

What is the Mechanicals' play about?

The Mechanicals want to perform a play at Theseus' wedding but they are uncertain what it should be about. Bottom suggests that it should be about a tyrant, about "Ercles," (his mispronunciation of "Hercules"). Quince is determined that it should be "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (I ii 11-12). A romantic story is appropriate for a wedding but the Pyramus-Thisbe story ends in disaster. Mistakenly thinking that a lion has eaten Thisbe, Pyramus kills himself; Thisbe finds him dead and kills herself.

A Romantic comedy ends with weddings, dances, and feasts, all of which represent harmony and fruitfulness. The tragic ending of the Pyramus-Thisbe play contrasts with that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If there is any comparison between Quince and Shakespeare, it is that Shakespeare is aware of the Romantic Comedy formula, Quince is not.

Though the Pyramus-Thisbe story ends tragically, the Mechanicals' stage representation of it is ludicrous. The Mechanicals act so badly and their verse is so ridiculous that the audience can only laugh. In short, any tragic effect is dispersed in laughter.

In the next section we will see why Shakespeare had his Mechanicals enact a tragic love story.

Why did Shakespeare include a play-within-the-play?

The play-within-the-play was quite common in Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare used it in *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ben Jonson used it in *Bartholomew Fair* and John Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Playwrights used it to comment on the main action and theatre culture.

A play-within-the-play underlined the most important ideas of the main play. For most of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the couples are not happily in love. They either actually quarrel or are on the verge of quarrelling. By making his fairies use magic, Shakespeare has all the right couples suddenly and contentedly in love.

The Mechanicals' play is both similar and different to this. Pyramus and Thisbe are in love and want to marry but their families have quarrelled and will not permit it. At the end, they are separated forever by death. The story reminds one of *Romeo and Juliet* which some critics think Shakespeare parodied in the Mechanicals' play. The more likely explanation is that the Mechanicals' "lamentable comedy" dramatises the tragic outcome of a parental injunction against love, which is how the Lysander-Hermia story may have ended, while comedy, lamentable or not, fits in with the marriage celebration.

Elizabethan dramatists often used the play-within-the-play to satirise aspects of theatre culture. Among Shakespeare's satiric targets in the Pyramus-Thisbe play are:

- **Bad plays and playwrights:** The script of the Pyramus-Thisbe play is ridiculously brief; it is ad hoc, as if being made up on the spot; tragedy and comedy are jumbled together; it has a lot of action but no character development; its verse is poor (doggerel is evident in, e.g., V i 214-221). The playwright wants to show off his classical knowledge but his script shows his ignorance of classical literature (see, e.g., the classical names in V i 194-197). His knowledge of English is equally amusing ("Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams" in V i 261). He thinks the audience will not understand the dramatic devices, so detailed comic explanations are included: the lantern is the horned moon, Snout is the wall, the lion introduces himself in a long speech and says the ladies must not be scared of him.
- **Bad actors:** The Mechanicals mispronounce words; they repeat lines if they think the audience has not heard them the first time (see V i 231-236); they deliver lines incomprehensibly out of nervousness (this is especially true of the Prologue); they converse with the audience.
- **Undisciplined audiences:** Loud comments from the audience disturb the actors. Audience and actors begin a dialogue (V i 246-249; 335-341). In Unit 1, we saw that this actually used to happen in Elizabethan theatres. Theseus sits through most of the play but begins to walk out before it ends. The players are desperate to keep their audience and suggest that they could perform a dance (Bergomask) instead of the Epilogue. All this was based on what actually happened in theatres.

[The rudeness of the Athenian aristocrats was emphasised in an old black and white film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Mechanicals leave the stage to prepare for the Bergomask. While they are changing, the aristocrats walk out of the room. The Mechanicals emerge excitedly from the Green Room (actors' changing room) only to see the backs of their audience. Their faces fall. They exit from the opposite side of the stage.]

---

## 5.4 LET US SUM UP

---

Of the three groups of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the aristocrats and fairies have more in common with each other than with the Mechanicals. They are mortals and the fairies are not, but their social leaders are rulers (Duke Theseus, King Oberon). Oberon, in fact, tells us how Titania is almost in love with Theseus, making it clear that there is social interaction between the aristocrats and the fairies.

But the Mechanicals are a separate group. Shakespeare used them for practical reasons (most of the audience would have identified with them; Bottom was a good part for Kempe); for professional reasons (he satirises the worst of Theatre culture through them); and for comic reasons (their language, ignorance of the new learning, and innocence creates much of the comic confusion).

Shakespeare presents them as comic but loveable.

---

## 5.5 QUESTIONS

---

1. How do we know that the Mechanicals are more English than any other set of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. What social strata do they belong to?
3. What does the name "Starveling" have to do with the harvests of 1595-96?
4. For whom did Shakespeare create the role of Bottom?
5. In what ways is Bottom the most outstanding Mechanical?
6. What use did Elizabethan playwrights make of the play-within-the-play?
7. In which of his other plays did Shakespeare use the play-within-the-play?
8. What are the common points between the main play and the Mechanicals' play?
9. What aspects of Elizabethan theatre culture are satirised in the Mechanicals' play?
10. Why do the Mechanicals rehearse in the forest?