



Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare's plays were written primarily in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. From the more rigid and monotonous "end-stopped" lines of the early plays, Shakespeare's verse developed a rhythm based on the phrases within each line that often overlapped the ends of lines.

Shakespeare experimented freely with syntax and vocabulary, and is credited with coining such modern English phrases as "fair play", "a foregone conclusion", "catch cold" and "disgraceful conduct". He invented such common words as *assassination*, *bump*, *eventful* and *lonely*, and he wrote lines familiar to people all over the world, including such lines as "To be or not to be, that is the question", "A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!" and "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!"

About the Play

A Midsummer Night's Dream, first produced c. 1594–1595, begins to explore the motif that became richly productive in Shakespeare's later comedies and romances, i.e. the presence of an untamed forest or a "green" world, which is both mirror and foil to the everyday world of the court. The characters in these plays travel from court to forest, and their experience in the dreamlike landscape of the latter transforms the reality to which they will return in the former. The journey suggests both the experience of falling in love and of watching a play, in that both of these experiences imaginatively transform people's perception of their world. Although the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are conventional figures who do not change profoundly as a result of their sojourn in the forest, their experience prefigures the more complex self-discovery of the characters in such plays as *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare's sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are varied. The play follows the course of four interwoven plots: (1) Theseus and Hippolyta; (2) the four Athenian lovers; (3) the fairies; and (4) the rustic players. Sources of the Theseus plot include Thomas North's translation (1579) of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The plot of the Athenian lovers follows the conventions of the Roman comedies of Terence and Plautus. The characteristics of the fairies were derived from traditional folklore, while the name Oberon may have been appropriated from earlier French and English romances and Titania from the *Metamorphoses*. Finally, the rustics may have been drawn directly from Shakespeare's own experience, with Bottom's metamorphosis based on Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (translated 1566) and the story of Pyramus and Thisbe borrowed from Ovid.

Historical Context

Sixteenth-century England was changing and growing in every sphere—politics, economy, religion and philosophy—and its literature reflected this exciting expansion. Two factors in particular contributed to the blooming of English poetry and drama during this period: the nationalistic fervour of a developing world power and the influence of Renaissance learning.

In 1558, Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne of an England divided by religious conflict and terrified by the double threat of civil war and foreign invasion. During her forty-five years in power she managed to ease the pressure of religious conflict by steering a practical course between two embattled faiths: she drew attention away from both the Catholic authority of Rome and the Protestant authority of Geneva, directing it instead toward her own English or Anglican authority. A political genius, she also staved off foreign war long enough for the country to gain strength. The inspiring defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, as well as the devotion of her subjects, rewarded her prudence.



Expanding as it was, Elizabethan England had a population of not more than five million, less than today's population of London alone. The economy was primarily agricultural, although agriculture was not prospering. Many citizens were becoming rich from the expanding industries of mining, manufacture and trade. The gap between rich and poor widened, and heavy taxation, uncontrolled inflation and widespread unemployment became serious problems. London at this time had a population of about 200,000 people in both city and suburbs. Trees and gardens were abundant, but lighting, safety and sanitation were poor. Epidemics of bubonic plague were frequent due to the lack of proper sewage disposal and medical care.

The fine arts flowered in Elizabethan England. In addition to the nationalism discussed above, a major influence on literature was the Renaissance, a European revival of arts and letters that began in the middle of the fifteenth century. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 had stimulated tremendous intellectual growth when a body of refugee scholars fled to Italy, bringing with them valuable manuscripts of "rediscovered" classics. Fuelling this movement was the introduction in Europe of printing with movable type. This revolutionary development made books widely accessible and became a powerful tool of social and religious change.

The new theories of the Renaissance existed side by side with the orthodoxy of the Middle Ages. Most Elizabethans still believed in the hierarchical cosmos postulated by Ptolemy in the second century C.E. This scheme put the earth at the centre of the universe, around which moved nine concentric spheres. The first sphere was the moon, whose monthly changes placed it at the boundary of imperfect, changeable mortality and perfect, changeless eternity. Succeeding spheres contained the sun and the planets, the fixed stars, and, at the outermost circle, the *Primer Mover*, which set all the bodies in motion and so produced the "music of the spheres". The strict hierarchy of the Ptolemaic universe was used to justify the strict social, political and religious hierarchies on earth.

During the Renaissance, however, such thinkers as Copernicus, Galileo and Montaigne profoundly challenged medieval beliefs concerning the nature of order and the cosmos. Shakespeare's villains were often a mouthpiece for dangerous new philosophies (e.g. Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*) while, in contrast, his heroic characters upheld more traditional values. Without incriminating himself, Shakespeare clearly invited his audience to question common assumptions and to explore the new ideas of the Renaissance.

Activities

1. Ask students what it means to "fall in love at first sight" and on what such a feeling is likely to be based. Then have them form pairs and take turns miming the process of falling in love at first sight with their partner. In contrast, ask students to mime a friendship growing into love.
2. Have students jot down the characteristics of appearance and behaviour they associate with fairies and to imagine what attitude fairies would likely take toward humans.
3. Have students become familiar with the sound of Shakespearean English through readings in audio and on video, and by the teacher.
4. Have students read aloud in class, helping them to read using syntax and punctuation rather than the line. This kind of reading will help students to understand what is happening in the text and to appreciate the natural rhythms of poetic language.
5. Have students memorise speeches from the play and recite them in front of the class. A manageable length for first efforts is 24–36 lines. If desired, teachers may mark performances on the memorisation itself, enunciation, expression and poise.
6. Ask students to dramatically present a scene or portion of a scene.
7. Have students rewrite specific dialogues or soliloquies in contemporary vernacular.

Act I

1–10: *Dramatis Personae*. On the line before each character's name, write the letter of the phrase in the righthand column which describes him or her.

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|------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Oberon | a. a carpenter |
| ___ 2. Hippolyta | b. Robin Goodfellow |
| ___ 3. Bottom | c. Duke of Athens |
| ___ 4. Hermia | d. daughter to Egeus, in love with Lysander |
| ___ 5. Puck | e. in love with Demetrius |
| ___ 6. Theseus | f. king of the fairies |
| ___ 7. Pyramus | g. queen of the fairies |
| ___ 8. Helena | h. a character in the play within the play |
| ___ 9. Titania | i. Queen of the Amazons |
| ___ 10. Quince | j. a weaver |

11–20: Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each sentence below.

11. The play takes place in the country of
- England.
 - France.
 - Italy.
 - Greece.
12. As the play opens, Theseus looks forward to his
- coronation.
 - inheritance.
 - rebirth.
 - wedding day.



13. "And then the moon, like to a silver bow / New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night / Of our solemnities." These lines contain the following two figures of speech:
- antithesis and apostrophe.
 - simile and personification.
 - hyperbole and metaphor.
 - metonymy and synecdoche.
14. Lysander considered himself a better husband for Hermia than Demetrius for all of the following reasons **except** that
- he loved her more than Demetrius.
 - Demetrius was a fickle lover.
 - he and Demetrius were equally rich.
 - Demetrius was of higher rank.
15. "Belike for want of rain, which I could well / Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes." Hermia's metaphor in this passage concerns
- a thunderstorm.
 - weeping.
 - abandonment.
 - vision.
16. By ". . . By all the vows that ever men have broke, / (In number more than ever women spoke)," Hermia means that
- men and women are equally likely to break their vows.
 - women have made fewer vows than men have broken.
 - vows are worthless because they are so easily broken.
 - men only break their vows to women and not to men.
17. A joiner works with
- hammer and nails.
 - scissors and cloth.
 - chickens and eggs.
 - bushes and vines.
18. A tinker works with
- shoes and boots.
 - needles and pins.
 - pots and pans.
 - cows and sheep.



6. Do you think that Bottom's "ass-head" is intended to look real or like a theatre prop? How would each choice affect the audience's interpretation of the story?

7. Explain the double meaning of "ass" created by Bottom's remarks in scene i and the other characters' perception of his appearance.

8. What did Bottom mean by ". . . to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together, nowadays"? Do you think his observation holds true today? Explain.
