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**A Midsummer
Night's Dream**

WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE



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Note

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616) probably wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* between 1594 and 1595. In several respects the play heralds a movement away from the conventionality of the early toward the subtleties and ambiguities of the mature comedies. It demonstrates both Shakespeare's great facility for a wide range of verse forms and rhyme schemes, and his ability to bring together in a single work plots and characters derived from diverse literary sources. The story of the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, was available to Shakespeare in two forms: in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and in Thomas North's *Lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes* (1579), a translation of Plutarch. The story of the crossed lovers Lysander, Hermia and Demetrius is also in Chaucer's work, though Shakespeare complicates things by introducing a second woman, Helena, and by playing on the vagaries of love. Bottom and his troupe of Athenian laborers provide an often hilarious depiction of the theatrical world of Elizabethan England. Their play-within-the-play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, is derived from Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As for Bottom's transformation into an ass, Shakespeare's most likely source was Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, translated by William Adlington in 1566. English folklore and popular literature contained ample material on the "puck," Robin Goodfellow, whereas Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the Fairies, appear in various literary works, both English and French. Of course, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* these preexisting literary creations take on a new, inimitably Shakespearean, life.

The play is in part about the potentially tragic conflict between social order and the freedom of the imagination embodied in the young lovers. The experience of love unfolds as a journey away from the city, and the parental and political authority that governs there, into a sylvan realm of fantasy, dream and delusion. Marriage comes to symbolize the

reconciliation of forces that in another context would remain in tragic opposition to one another. But, in a typically Shakespearean manner, the play turns upon the metaphor of the theater itself, questioning, sometimes mockingly, sometimes reverently, the nature of art and imagination, and their relationship to the world they reflect and transform.

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Dramatis Personae

THESEUS, Duke of Athens.

EGEUS, father to Hermia.

LYSANDER, }
DEMETRIUS, } in love with Hermia.

PHILOSTRATE, master of the revels to Theseus.

QUINCE, a carpenter.

SNUG, a joiner.

BOTTOM, a weaver.

FLUTE, a bellows-mender.

SNOUT, a tinker.

STARVELING, a tailor.

HIPPOLYTA, Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus.

HERMIA, daughter to Egeus, in love with Lysander.

HELENA, in love with Demetrius.

OBERON, King of the Fairies.

TITANIA, Queen of the Fairies.

PUCK, or Robin Goodfellow.

PEASEBLOSSOM, }
COBWEB, } fairies.
MOTH, }
MUSTARDSEED, }

Other fairies attending their King and Queen. Attendants on
Theseus and Hippolyta.

SCENE—*Athens, and a wood near it*

Act I—Scene I—Athens

THE PALACE OF THESEUS

Enter THESEUS, HIPPOLYTA, PHILOSTRATE, *and* Attendants.

THE. Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon: but, O, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! she lingers¹ my desires,
Like to a step-dame, or a dowager,
Long withering out a young man's revenue.

HIP. Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.²

THE. Go, Philostrate,
Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments;
Awake the pert³ and nimble spirit of mirth:
Turn melancholy forth to funerals;
The pale companion is not for our pomp. [*Exit* PHILOSTRATE.
Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph⁴ and with revelling.

Enter EGEUS, HERMIA, LYSANDER, *and* DEMETRIUS.

¹ *lingers*] prolongs.

² *solemnities*] celebration (of the wedding).

³ *pert*] lively.

⁴ *triumph*] public festivity.

- EGE. Happy be Theseus, our renowned duke!
 THE. Thanks, good Egeus: what's the news with thee?
 EGE. Full of vexation come I, with complaint
 Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
 Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
 This man hath my consent to marry her.
 Stand forth, Lysander: and, my gracious duke,
 This man hath bewitch'd the bosom⁵ of my child:
 Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
 And interchanged love-tokens with my child:
 Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung,
 With feigning⁶ voice, verses of feigning love;
 And stolen the impression of her fantasy⁷
 With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits,⁸
 Knacks,⁹ trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats, messengers
 Of strong prevailment¹⁰ in unhardened¹¹ youth:
 With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart;
 Turn'd her obedience, which is due to me,
 To stubborn harshness: and, my gracious duke,
 Be it so she will not here before your Grace
 Consent to marry with Demetrius,
 I beg the ancient privilege of Athens,
 As she is mine, I may dispose of her:
 Which shall be either to this gentleman
 Or to her death, according to our law
 Immediately¹² provided in that case.
- THE. What say you, Hermia? be advised, fair maid:
 To you your father should be as a god;
 One that composed your beauties; yea, and one
 To whom you are but as a form in wax
 By him imprinted and within his power
 To leave the figure or disfigure it.
 Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.
- HER. So is Lysander.

⁵ bosom] heart.

⁶ feigning] soft.

⁷ stolen . . . fantasy] captured her imagination and love.

⁸ gawds, conceits] baubles, fanciful presents.

⁹ Knacks] knickknacks.

¹⁰ prevailment] influence.

¹¹ unhardened] impressionable.

¹² Immediately] expressly.

- THE. In himself he is;
 But in this kind, wanting your father's voice,¹³
 The other must be held the worthier.
- HER. I would my father look'd but with my eyes.
- THE. Rather your eyes must with his judgement look.
- HER. I do entreat your Grace to pardon me.
 I know not by what power I am made bold,
 Nor how it may concern¹⁴ my modesty,
 In such a presence here to plead my thoughts;
 But I beseech your Grace that I may know
 The worst that may befall me in this case,
 If I refuse to wed Demetrius.
- THE. Either to die the death, or to abjure
 For ever the society of men.
 Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires;
 Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
 Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
 You can endure the livery of a nun;
 For aye¹⁵ to be in shady cloister mew'd,¹⁶
 To live a barren sister all your life,
 Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
 Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood,
 To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
 But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd,¹⁷
 Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
 Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.
- HER. So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
 Ere I will yield my virgin patent¹⁸ up
 Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke
 My soul consents not to give sovereignty.
- THE. Take time to pause; and, by the next new moon,—
 The sealing-day betwixt my love and me,
 For everlasting bond of fellowship,—
 Upon that day either prepare to die
 For disobedience to your father's will,

¹³ in this kind . . . voice] in business of this nature, lacking your father's approval.

¹⁴ concern] benefit.

¹⁵ aye] ever.

¹⁶ mew'd] confined.

¹⁷ earthlier . . . distill'd] i.e., happier on earth is the one who will live on after death through his or her child.

¹⁸ virgin patent] privilege of remaining a virgin.

Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;
Or on Diana's altar to protest¹⁹
For aye austerity and single life.

DEM. Relent, sweet Hermia: and, Lysander, yield
Thy crazed title²⁰ to my certain right.

LYS. You have her father's love, Demetrius;
Let me have Hermia's: do you marry him.

EGE. Scornful Lysander! true, he hath my love,
And what is mine my love shall render him.
And she is mine, and all my right of her
I do estate unto Demetrius.

LYS. I am, my lord, as well derived²¹ as he,
As well possess'd;²² my love is more than his;
My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd,
If not with vantage,²³ as Demetrius';
And, which is more than all these boasts can be,
I am beloved of beauteous Hermia:
Why should not I then prosecute my right?
Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head,²⁴
Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,
And won her soul; and she, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
Upon this spotted²⁵ and inconstant man.

THE. I must confess that I have heard so much,
And with Demetrius thought to have spoke thereof;
But, being over-full of self-affairs,
My mind did lose it. But, Demetrius, come;
And come, Egeus; you shall go with me,
I have some private schooling²⁶ for you both.
For you, fair Hermia, look you arm yourself
To fit your fancies²⁷ to your father's will;
Or else the law of Athens yields you up,—
Which by no means we may extenuate,²⁸

¹⁹ *protest* | vow.

²⁰ *crazed title* | invalid claim.

²¹ *well derived* | nobly born.

²² *well possess'd* | wealthy.

²³ *vantage* | superiority.

²⁴ *avouch it to his head* | declare it in his presence.

²⁵ *spotted* | guilty.

²⁶ *schooling* | admonition.

²⁷ *fancies* | thoughts of love.

²⁸ *extenuate* | mitigate.

To death, or to a vow of single life.
Come, my Hippolyta: what cheer, my love?
Demetrius and Egeus, go along:

I must employ you in some business
Against²⁹ our nuptial, and confer with you
Of something nearly that concerns yourselves.

EGE. With duty and desire we follow you.

[*Exeunt all but* LYSANDER *and* HERMIA.]

LYS. How now, my love! why is your cheek so pale?
How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

HER. Belike for want of rain, which I could well
Beteem³⁰ 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 blood,—

HER. O cross!³¹ too high to be enthral'd to low.

LYS. Or else misgraffed in respect of years,—

HER. O spite! too old to be engaged to young.

LYS. Or else it stood upon the choice of friends,—

HER. O hell! to choose love by another's eyes.

LYS. Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;
Brief as the lightning in the collied³² night,
That, in a spleen,³³ unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.³⁴

HER. If then true lovers have been ever cross'd,³⁵
It stands as an edict in destiny:
Then let us teach our trial patience,
Because it is a customary cross,

²⁹ *against* | in preparation for.

³⁰ *Beteem* | grant.

³¹ *cross* | The cross symbolizes here that which thwarts or hinders.

³² *collied* | dark.

³³ *spleen* | fit of passion.

³⁴ *confusion* | ruin.

³⁵ *ever cross'd* | always thwarted.