William Shakespeare’s
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

Education Outreach Supporters
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Introduction

We’d like to start off by thanking you for bringing our production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* into your school! We believe that putting classic texts on stage enables them to be explored, interpreted, and understood in countless new ways. We hope this study guide will allow you to get the most out of your experience, and we look forward to discussing your thoughts and questions after the show!

Biography of William Shakespeare

Shakespeare’s works are over 400 years old. Since his time, so many other books and plays have been written that we may ask why we still care to read and perform his works. There are many ways we can answer this question, depending on where we look. First, let’s consider what these plays are about. People often refer to Shakespeare’s work as timeless and universal because the issues and themes prevalent in his works apply to humans of all ages and backgrounds. Themes of love, jealousy, miscommunication, parent-child relationships, and political strife are relevant in any society, whether in the 16th or 21st century. Through watching or reading Shakespeare, we

### A Timeline of Shakespeare’s Life

- **1564**: Born in Stratford-upon-Avon
- **1571**: Likely began his formal education at age 7
- **1582**: Marries Anne Hathaway
- **1583**: First child Susanna is born
- **1585**: Moves to London to pursue theatre career
- **1585**: Twins Judith and Hamnet are born
- **1592**: Moves to London to pursue theatre career
- **1593**: Starts to write sonnets
- **1594**: Publishes first works of poetry
- **1594**: Starts managing, as well as writing for, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men
- **1596**: Begun writing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*
- **1599**: Lord Chamberlain’s Men begin performing at the newly built Globe Theater
- **1600**: Writes *Hamlet*, one of his most well-known plays
- **1604**: Retires from acting
- **1613**: The Globe Theatre burns down
- **1614**: The Globe Theatre is rebuilt
- **1616**: Dies and is buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-Upon-Avon

adapted from [http://absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/timeline.htm](http://absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/timeline.htm)
can easily draw parallels to contemporary and historical issues. Shakespeare's plays are also very much driven by human psychology. His characters are so well developed and complex that we are able to witness a wide range of human emotions as we watch their journey through the story. This also enables the audience to identify with these characters and their personal struggles throughout each play.

Aside from the artistic importance of his works, Shakespeare also made many contributions to the English language. He coined thousands of new words, including many we now use every day like eyeball, swagger, dawn, and compromise. He also invented many phrases that are still used today. “All’s well that ends well” is actually the title of one of his comedies! One might even say that Shakespeare's plays were part of the birth of modern English due to his creative wordplay, clever imagery, and evocative, if sometimes crude, analogies. Studying Shakespeare can improve the comprehension of the English language.

So, why do we still choose to read and watch Shakespeare today? To summarize, we can learn so much about Elizabethan England's culture, traditions, political stances, and views on the world, and can draw insightful comparisons with the issues we face today.

QUESTIONS
1. What do you already know about Shakespeare coming into this experience? What are your preconceived notions about him and his work?
2. What is something you would like to learn about Shakespeare?

WRITING PROMPT
1. While reading or watching Midsummer, try to find something or someone that you can connect to personally. It could be a character, a specific line, one of the main themes, or the relationship between two characters. Where is your point of connection?

Historical Context

SHAKESPEARE’S TRADITION OF BORROWING
Most of Shakespeare’s plays are based on pre-existing stories. Shakespeare’s plays and poems are very much inspired by the writers he encountered at school as a result of the rise of humanism during the English Renaissance. This rise meant that educational studies moved away from Christian theology towards more “classical” studies such as: philosophy, history, drama and poetry, known as humanities. Shakespeare's Roman tragedies: Troilus and Cressida, Coriolanus, and Julius Caesar are paraphrased from an English translation of Parallel Lives; a series of biographies of famous Greek and Roman characters by the Greek historian, Plutarch. The Menaechmi and the Amphitruo, two comedies by

‘OBERON, TITANIA, AND PUCC DANCING WITH FAIRES’
WILLIAM BLAKE 1786

A Midsummer Night’s Dream Study Guide
Roman playwright Plautus, serve as the basis for Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. *Hamlet* contains an entire speech – the Player's account of the death of Priam – taken from Roman poet, Virgil's *Aeneid*. Shakespeare takes inspiration for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from several sources.

Many of the characters and some of the basic plot lines of the play are “borrowed”. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, and her band of fairies were heavily influenced by the work of Edmund Spenser, an English poet, and his epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*. The characters of Theseus and Hippolyta and their history are allusions to Plutarch's Lives; they also appear in English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer's, *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically the first tale, "A Knight's Tale". This tale recounts the story of two knights and their dispute over a woman, and Theseus's ultimate intervention. Both A Knight's Tale and Shakespeare's *Midsummer* explore the contrasts between the magical forest and the law and reason of human civilization. Thus, the plays were linked to a common understanding and appreciation of tales that were part of the culture in which Shakespeare lived.

**ELIZABETHAN RENAISSANCE**

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written in either 1595 or 1596, with the first known production taking place in 1605. This period was known as the Elizabethan era, named after the reign of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth's 44-year reign provided England with the much needed stability that had been lacking under previous monarchs. Historians often depict this time as the golden age in English history, the peak of the English Renaissance.

The word “renaissance” is French for rebirth or revival. This was a period of flourishing art and culture that saturated Europe, starting in Italy in the late 14th century and making its way to England by the 16th century. The English Renaissance lasted for about 100 years, and was known for being a prosperous time for English Drama. William Shakespeare, and his occasional rival Christopher Marlowe, were the primary dramatists during this time. Their plays were performed both for the court and for the general public. In 1580, when the most popular theatres were full in the summer months, the total theatre capacity of London was nearly 5,000 audience members. By 1610, after the building of various theatre companies and facilities, the capacity grew to over 10,000. Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James VI, had a great love for the theatre and were patrons of the arts. King James VI favoured Shakespeare so much he honored Shakespeare's company with the title “The King's Men”.

**ANCIENT GREECE**

The blossoming arts, culture, and rebirth of classical learning during the Renaissance Era, led to a rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman works. Perhaps that is why Shakespeare decided to set his characters in Athens, Greece. What is the significance of placing his characters in Ancient Greece? First, Shakespeare uses geographical distance to put his audience at ease. By placing the setting so far away, audiences were more likely
to look at the plays objectively rather than getting tied up in current regional prejudices. Secondly, Shakespeare wanted to establish a place that embodied order and restriction. Ancient Greece brought about the earliest forms of government and cultural innovation. The city-state of Athens was a center of the arts, of philosophy and learning. It was considered to be not only the birthplace of democracy, established in 507-508 BCE, but also the birthplace of Western civilization itself. Athens was a symbol of law and order, a hierarchical and patriarchal society where fathers had significant control over the lives of their children, more specifically their daughters. Shakespeare creates this world in his opening scene where Egeus decides to invoke Athenian law over his daughter, Hermia. He demands to the Duke that the law punish Hermia if she does not marry Demetrius.

MIDSUMMER’S EVE AND MAY DAY

In addition to the allusions to Greek culture, the play also incorporates English customs. The play’s title refers to an English holiday: Midsummer’s Eve. Midsummer’s Eve was celebrated on June 23rd, the night before the summer solstice on June 24th. This was the epitome of party time for the Elizabethans, celebrating the longest day of the year and the start of the summer season. It was also a celebration of fertility, the harvesting and planting of crops, love, birth and marriage. Revelers would dance, drink, sing and share stories of supernatural tales. This was a time when spirits were thought to be free to walk the earth. Therefore, this day proves to be the perfect setting for Shakespeare’s Midsummer, as he blends the rigid real world of Athens with the mysterious, mystical world of Titania and the fairies.

Originating from a Roman festival to honor Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, May Day is another Elizabethan festival that Shakespeare utilizes. When discovering the lovers awakening outside of the forest, Theseus, Duke of Athens, states, “No doubt they rose up early to observe / The rite of May” (IV.i.132-133). “The rite of May” is a reference to “maying” - a tradition that takes place on the first day of May. In Elizabethan England, before dawn on the first of May, young men and women would go into the woods and collect blooming tree branches to be put up as decoration. They would erect a maypole (a long pole that is dug into the ground and is decorated with flowers and ribbons) to dance around. Friends would share stories and toast to the coming of summer.

Today, May Day is celebrated in a variety of countries around the world. In Britain, the first day of May, is celebrated as the start of the summer season. Maypole dancing continues to this day in many communities, often children dancing around the pole, creating vibrant patterns with the ribbons. The first of May is also treated as a public holiday and many businesses are closed. In Britain, this day has is also as International Workers’ Day or Labour Day, different than the American Labor Day. It is a celebration of labourers and the working classes. May Day is even celebrated here in Boston today! For over forty years, people have gathered on the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, MA at dawn for Morris dancing, maypole winding, and traditional May Day caroles.
QUESTIONS:
1. What is a place that symbolizes structure and order for you? What is a place that symbolizes freedom? Why?
2. What sort of holiday or celebrations do you have that may embody the spirit of Midsummer’s Eve?

WRITING PROMPT:
1. Put yourself in the position of the director for a production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Oftentimes, the director and designers decide to set the play in a different location than is written. If you were to change the setting, where would you place the characters? If it was not the forest and Athens, where else could this story take place? How would the two locations differ? Defend your choice.

MYTHOLOGY
Because A Midsummer Night’s Dream takes place in Athens, Greece, Shakespeare includes many references to Greek and Roman mythology. The play follows the events surrounding the wedding of Theseus to Hippolyta. In the play, Shakespeare makes Theseus the Duke of Athens. However, that title did not exist in Ancient Greece. In Greek Mythology, he was one of the most important heroes and kings, but he was never a real historical figure. Even though Greek Myth were fictional accounts used to explain the origin of the world, it was popular belief at the time to view the myths as factual. Thus, Theseus, also called “The Unifier”, is responsible for the the political unification of Athens. He is called “the founder of democracy” and was one of the first rulers to transfer some of his power to an elected assembly. His bride, Hippolyta, is the Queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a matriarchal society of warrior women. In DC Comics, Wonder Woman (or Diana Prince) is Hippolyta’s daughter, born from clay and without a father. According to Greek myth, Theseus kidnapped Hippolyta from the land of the Amazons, intending to make her his bride. The Amazonians, seeking to free Hippolyta from the Athenians, went to war. This war was called the Attic War. Many versions of the myths say that Hippolyta was killed in battle, but in all versions the Amazonians lost to the Athenians.

Shakespeare also alludes to mythology that an English audience would be more familiar with. Puck is a figure well known in English folklore. He is often referred to as a fairy, demon or pixie. The character of Puck is also known as Robin Goodfellow, famous for shape-shifting and misleading travelers. A book of myths published in 1639 called “Robin Goodfellow: His Mad Pranks and Merry Jests” includes an illustration of Puck with hooves and horns of a goat. This illustration of Puck connects him more to the Greek god Pan. Pan resembled a satyr, a man with goat’s ears, legs and a tail. Pan was the Greek god of nature and the wild and often accompanied

’ROBIN GOOD-FELLOW, HIS MAD PRANKES AND MERRY JESTS’, 1639

DIANA PRINCE, OR WONDER WOMAN, AND HER MOTHER HIPPOLYTA FROM THE 2017 FILM, WONDER WOMAN
the fairies. Pan is often associated with fertility and the spring. Interestingly, Ancient Greeks considered Pan to also be the god of theatrical criticism. Though Shakespeare uses the mechanicals to hilariously critique the workings of a theatre company, Puck’s hand in the orchestration of many events in the play give him this omnipresence. Puck’s remarks to the audience at the end of the play, excusing the actors by giving the audience permission to say it was all just a dream, could also be seen as criticism of all the wacky events and characters.

WRITING PROMPT:
1. Create your own myth to explain some natural phenomenon or creation of establishment. It could be anything from the creation of the Sun to the founding of a fictional country. You can create your own Gods or Heroes.

Literary Devices

CONTRAST
Shakespeare utilizes contrast in order to emphasize theme and highlight defining characteristics. The fairies are graceful and devious, while the mechanicals are blundering and simple; the mechanicals are jovial, while the lovers are overly serious. Helena and Hermia, are a pairing built on contrast. Though both are noble women of equal standing, Hermia is short and uncompromising in her will, whereas Helena is tall and a tad compliant. When talking to Demetrius, Helena states, “I am your spaniel...The more you beat me, I will fawn on you...spurn me, strike me, Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave, Unworthy as I am, to follow you” (II.i.203-7). This stands in stark comparison to Hermia’s behavior who refuses to stand down when it seems her lover has betrayed her.

Contrast also appears in the setting. The play is structured around the contrast between the order of the Athens and the freedom of the forest. When the lovers find themselves away from their structured and hierarchical society, order is no longer a priority and the relationships break apart. The forest is a place away from an angry father’s puritanical rule. But this is comedy, therefore relationships are more happily rebuilt in the free atmosphere of the wood before the characters are obliged to return to society.

Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double.
(IV.i.187-188)

Character doubling is a theatrical device where one actor plays two or more parts in the same play. This device can be used for many different reasons. Logistically, it enables smaller groups of actors to perform shows with many characters. Artistically, it creates an exciting opportunity for the actors, who can tackle the challenge of
having multiple roles. And theatrically, it allows the audience to make connections between various storylines, and to compare and contrast different characters. The fairy world is the unconscious representation of Athens, where various characters become substitutions of their counterparts in structured society. Therefore, many productions choose to double Hippolyta/Titania and Theseus/Oberon. In one world, we have Theseus (Duke of Athens), who has kidnapped Hippolyta (Queen of the Amazons) to be his bride. Her resistance to the marriage is futile in the patriarchal society of Athens. Meanwhile, in the forest, their fairy counterparts are approaching an all out war. Oberon (King of the Fairies) resents that Titania (Queen of the Fairies) has adopted an orphan boy. The actors playing these roles get to represent two very different types of unhappy royal marriages.

MISPERCEPTION AND THE ABSURDITY OF LOVE
During the course of the play Puck applies the love-potion multiple times to the lovers’ eyes, first mistakenly and then on purpose, to amend his wrong doings. Puck confuses the play’s couples on the first application, making both Lysander and Demetrius immediately turn their attentions from Hermia to Helena. Shakespeare uses the magic of the flower to suggest the lovers are interchangeable and to satrise the convention of ‘love at first sight’, specifically in the forest. The men rarely stay true to their vows and professions of love, turning against the woman they swore the worthiest. The constant back and forth Lysander and Demetrius fall victim to makes it difficult to distinguish the two as significantly different characters. “The lovers are exchangeable. The partner is now nameless and faceless. He or she just happens to be the nearest” (Smith, Dream, Illusion). It is the magic of the forest that confuses the lovers’ personalities. In the structure of Athens, Lysander and Demetrius are distinguishable by their patterns of speech and approaches to love. Where Lysander is the type to elope with his lover, Demetrius is bound to a code of honor and abides by the law of Athens.

QUESTIONS:
1. Can you find any other places where contrast appears in the play? What do you think Shakespeare presented so many opposites?
2. After Puck’s last monologue, do you think the events of the forest were all just a dream? If so, who does Shakespeare imply is sleeping? Who’s dream was it?

WHO ARE THE MECHANICALS?
The Mechanicals, otherwise known as the craftsmen or artisans for their professions, are an amateur group of actors. When we encounter them in the play, they are looking to gain recognition as a theatre troupe by having their production selected to be performed at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. In our production they include: Peter Quince, the carpenter; Snug, the joiner - a type of carpenter who builds by joining pieces of wood; Nick Bottom as ‘Pyramus’, the weaver; Francis Flute as ‘Thisbe’, the bellows-mender; and Rob Starveling as ‘The Moonshine’, the tailor. They perform what is called by Quince, “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel
Death of Pyramus and Thisbe. In our production, the characters of Snout and Starveling are played by one actor. Shakespeare parodies the tragedy of the lovers through the Mechanicals' production of the play. Here we see contrast again! Not only does Shakespeare contrast the crude adaptation with the highly transformational world that he creates in the rest of A Midsummer Night's Dream, he also contrasts the Mechanicals with theatre companies of his time. He removes the transformation of the mulberry tree, and much of the transformational magic of theatre through the Mechanicals' production. The group's dynamics mock the operations of an amateur theatre. Quince acts as director and chooses the play and the roles for the craftsmen. But throughout the process, Bottom continually attempts to make justifications for the production. He attempts to play all the roles, doubting the ability of the other craftsmen, then decides to make several adjustments in order to make the play more "suitable" for such a regal audience. First, he orders Quince to create a prologue for the play, which explains away most of the violence in the play; and makes Snug, the lion, deliver a speech to the women in the audience that he is not a real lion and will cause no harm to them. These serve to highlight the ways in which theatres of the time dealt with the limitations of theatre technology, or rather the ways in which not to deal with those limitations.

QUESTIONS:
1. Why does Shakespeare use "Pyramus and Thisbe" as the play for the Mechanicals to produce?
2. What are other theatre conventions Shakespeare comments on through the Mechanicals?

RHYMING AND DOUBLING IN THE LANGUAGE

This theme of contrast, doubling and parallels carries over even into the language. Over half of the lines in Midsummer are rhyming, the second largest proportion behind Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost. Shakespeare often uses the rhythm and style of the language in his plays - whether prose, rhymed verse, blank verse, or a combination - to give the audience clues about the characters and the themes. The language in Midsummer is playful and enjoyable to listen to, but when we dig deeper we can find hidden clues. Shakespeare uses word structures like parallelism (repeating the same grammar, rhythm or sentence structure from line to line) and isocolon (repeating syntactic structures of the same length) to tell us about the characters and their relationships. The first scene of the play has an excellent example of rhyming, parallelism and isocolon all together. Hermia and Helena are discussing Demetrius, whom Helena loves unrequitedly. Demetrius instead loves Hermia, who loves Lysander.

HERMIA I frown upon him; yet he loves me still.
HELENA O that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill!
HERMIA I give him curses; yet he gives me love.
HELENA O that my prayers could such affection move!
HERMIA The more I hate, the more he follows me.
HELENA The more I love, the more he hateth me.

(Act I, Scene I)

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM: MOON AND DREAMS

Illuminating the night sky, the moon plays a huge role in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Characters throughout the play refer to its powerful force over human nature. In Theseus' opening lines he states, "...
four happy days bring in/Another moon; but O, methinks, how slow/This old moon wanes!” (I.I.). Here he is complaining to his soon to be wife, Hippolyta, that time is moving too slowly. He is eager for their wedding, which can’t come soon enough. Theseus is using the phases of the moon to show the passage of time. Right from the start of the show, Shakespeare paints an image of an old moon, slowly moving across the sky, controlling the actions of the characters below. We see the moon personified many times throughout the play. When we first meet Titania and Oberon in the forest, they are arguing about their infidelities. Because of their discord, the world is confused and upside down. She states, “Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,/Pale in her anger, washes all the air,/That rheumatic diseases do abound” (II.I.103-105). Again, we see the moon personified. This time as an outraged woman who controls the tides and spreads disease.

The title alone suggests that dreams play an important role in the play. Dreams are often nonsensical and create an ambiguous sense of time. When asleep and dreaming, the impossible becomes possible. The fairy world helps to create this dream like atmosphere. Titania, Oberon and the fairies use potions to trick each other and the Athenian lovers. Characters throughout the play use dreams to attempt to understand bizarre events that occur. For example, the mechanical, Bottom, reflects, “I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream” (IV.I.204-206). The only way he can explain the strange events is that it was only a dream. Shakespeare challenges his audiences - was this a dream or reality? At the end of the play, Puck excuses the events the audience has just witnessed. He states that if they were offended in any way, just think of the experience as a dream and nothing more.

QUESTIONS:
1. Find the rhyming, parallelism and isocolon in Hermia and Helena’s dialogue above.
2. What do these literary choices tell us about this moment and about these characters?
3. With a partner, read through the short dialogue. How does it feel to say the words out loud? Try standing up, taking a hold of your partners hand and playing a simple tug of war. Now say the words. How does that change how they come out?

Classic Repertory Company’s Production

Throughout the past 400 years, A Midsummer Night’s Dream has been performed hundreds of times on stages across the globe, and each production is unique. Every company has the opportunity to decide how they want to tell the story. The actors and director may decide to place the story in a different setting, or to change the gender or ethnicity of one of the characters, or add new elements like movement or music. Making these changes can provide the opportunity to highlight new themes in the story, to draw connections between the play and our modern day, or simply to mix things up! Our production is no different.
To start, we have our own unique group of actors who have their own ideas and interpretations of the play. Our production is 90-minutes long, which means we’ve had to cut some of the text and a few minor characters to focus on what we think is most important. We also have a cast of eight actors, which means you’ll see actors playing multiple characters. We take our shows on the road to venues of all sizes, which means our set needs to be light and mobile. We have lots of musicians in our cast, so we like to use live music. Our actors are all recent college graduates, which means some of them will play characters that are older or younger than they are. All of these things make our production unique, in the hopes of offering you a new way to experience the story.

POST SHOW QUESTIONS:
1. Shakespeare’s language is specific, complex and can sometimes be hard to understand. Did you struggle to understand the text at times when you read the play? Was it easier to comprehend when you heard the words spoken by the actors and the actions played out on stage? Did the story make more sense to you when you read it or when you watched it on stage? Why or why not? Do you think your experience of seeing the play would have been different if you hadn’t read it first?

WRITING PROMPT:
1. Look through your local newspapers or online for theatre reviews. Read a few, then write your own review of Classic Repertory Company’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Think about what parts of the show you enjoyed, what parts you didn’t understand, how the performers embodied the characters, and whether any production elements hindered or enhanced the telling of the story. Feel free to send the review over to us when you’re done!

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