

**W**ith its blend of fantasy and reality, fairies and mortals, conflict and happy resolution, the comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers children a rich introduction to Shakespeare. It is probably the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, and the one that children are most likely to have heard of or to have seen. It was written in 1595 or 1596, representing the transition from Shakespeare's early lighter comedies to his more mature plays.

What will grade-school students like about this play?

Even though the play isn't always easy to follow, there are several elements that really appeal to children:

- Four young people—two pairs of lovers—get into a seemingly hopeless tangle that comes right in the end.
- The fairy character Puck (or Robin Goodfellow) flits about, administering magic potions and ointments that cause people to do and say things they wouldn't otherwise do or say.
- Fairies with fanciful names (Peaseblossom and Mustardseed) dance and sing and trick each other. There are many opportunities for music and dance in this play, though it can also be performed simply and with background music alone.
- The character Bottom is pompous, gets a lot of words wrong, and is tricked into wearing a donkey's head.
- The fairy queen Titania is tricked by Puck into falling in love with Bottom when he is wearing the donkey head.

As in all the scripts in this book, the play's events are regularly forecast and summarized by the narrator. So even though there are four plot lines, most children will be able to keep them straight if they listen to the narrators.

The play is set in ancient Athens and opens in the palace of Duke Theseus. The duke announces that in four days he will marry Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. The first plot deals with Duke Theseus's plans for involving the whole city of Athens in a great celebration.

The second plot involves two pairs of young lovers. A young woman named Hermia wants to marry a young man named Lysander, and he wants to marry her. But Hermia's father insists that she marry another man—Demetrius—whom she does not love, or face the consequences. By Athenian law, Hermia's father may have her put to death for refusing to marry Demetrius, and he seeks the duke's support in threatening her with that punishment. Hermia and Lysander decide to run away. Before they do, they confide their plans to Hermia's best friend, Helena—who, as it turns out, is in love with Demetrius. Unfortunately, Demetrius doesn't love Helena. He loves Hermia and insists on his right to marry her.

A third plot involves the exploits of a band of merry Athenian laborers who

gather in the forest to rehearse a play in honor of the duke's nuptials. The headiness of a long night causes an unexpected twist in which one of these players gets tangled up in the fairy world that exists deep in the woods. And the fourth plot moves us further into that realm with another royal couple: the jealous Oberon, King of the Fairies, and his beautiful and proud Queen Titania.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* interweaves the two settings of the real world and the fairy world so smoothly that by the end, the characters have the sense that they have been asleep and dreaming. The play is not all silliness and trickiness, but even young actors know that we mortals can be foolish and wrong. Seeing the real characters and the fairies mirror each other's imperfections can be simple fun for the youngest children and a more complex adventure for older ones.

## Suggested Music

*Songs & Dances from Shakespeare* (compact disc). The Broadside Band, Saydisc Records, 1994.

*Come, Gentle Night: Music of Shakespeare's World* (compact disc). Ensemble Galilei, Telarc Records, 2000.

Other suggestions for live or recorded music: any Renaissance dance music or simple tunes played on the recorder, flute, guitar, or instrument of your choice.

## Suggested Props

Paper (for the players' play scripts)

Flower

Fruit

Cardboard painted to look like the character "Wall"

## Suggested Backdrops

Grand palace

Forest

*Backdrop note:* If you have a curtain and you want to stage a realistic production, consider making the forest scenes the main backdrop. All other scenes could then be staged in front of the curtain.

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# A Midsummer Night's Dream

## ACT I

### Scene 1

Duke's palace.

*(Horn sounds. ENTER NARRATOR, DUKE THESEUS, HIPPOLYTA, EGEUS, PHILOSTRATE, HERMIA, LYSANDER, and DEMETRIUS.)*

*(These characters strike statuelike poses as Narrator speaks: Duke and Hippolyta hand in hand, with Egeus and Demetrius opposite them and the other two young people behind them.)*

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**NARRATOR:**

Love is grand, when it goes smoothly—when the person you love loves you back and when everyone you care about approves of the person you love. Then everything is right with the world, and you can get married and live happily ever after. But even in Mr. William Shakespeare's time, and even before that—in ancient Athens, where Shakespeare set this play—love didn't always run smoothly. Why should it? That's life!

You see before you the court of Duke Theseus, the Duke of Athens, in Greece. The duke is a lucky man, because after he captured Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, he fell in love with her, and she fell in love with him too and has agreed to marry him in four days.

But meanwhile an old man, Egeus, has troubles. His daughter Hermia and a young man named Lysander want to get married, but long ago Egeus decided that his daughter would marry a man named Demetrius. Hermia refuses to marry Demetrius. Now, in ancient Athens, it was the rule that when children refused to marry the people their parents wanted them to marry, their parents could have them put to death. Egeus has come before Duke Theseus to say that if his daughter continues to refuse marriage to Demetrius, he requests permission to have her put to death.

This play is a comedy! Welcome!

*(As Narrator finishes speech, characters start to move.)*

**DUKE THESEUS:**

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!

**HIPPOLYTA:**

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, my love.  
Four nights will quickly dream away the time.

**DUKE THESEUS:**

Go, Philostrate,  
Stir up the Athenian youth and have them make merriment  
For our wedding day.

**PHILOSTRATE:**

Yes, my lord.

*(He bows and EXITS.)*

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**DUKE THESEUS:**

*(Turning to Egeus.)*

Egeus, good man, what's the news with thee?

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**EGEUS:**

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 Hermia.  
Stand forth, Lysander. —And, my gracious duke,  
This man *(Gestures to Lysander.)* hath bewitched my child  
With rhymes and love tokens and songs.  
Sir, you have turned her obedience to me  
Into stubborn harshness.  
I therefore beg the ancient privilege of Athens:  
Either she shall have this gentleman Demetrius  
Or, according to our law, she shall go to her death.

**DUKE THESEUS:**

What say you, Hermia? Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

**HERMIA:**

So is Lysander.  
I do beg your Grace to pardon me.  
May I know the worst that will befall me  
If I refuse to wed Demetrius?