

bell shakespeare's
**a midsummer
night's dream**
by william shakespeare directed by anna volska

teacher's kit

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ABOUT THIS TEACHER'S KIT

These notes were compiled with reference to the 2004 Bell Shakespeare production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The text used for this production and in these notes is the Arden Edition (1979). It is suggested that teachers take students through Lessons One, Two and Three as an introduction to the play before seeing the production. This will enhance and enrich their understanding of the production and foster post-production discussion. Lesson Four will be useful for Drama and English students studying the play in relation to Shakespeare as performance. Lesson Five contains information about the design and physical approach to the production, so may be useful for post-production discussion.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS TEACHER'S KIT

Peta Downes has a Master of Fine Arts in theatre direction and a BA - first class Honours in educational drama/directing from the Queensland University of Technology. She currently works for the Bell Shakespeare Company as a Director with the Actors at Work programme and as a Senior Arts Educator for Bell's Education programme, conducting interactive Shakespeare workshops for teachers and students across Australia.

Neville Harrison was formerly an English and Drama teacher at Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School in Castlecove, Sydney and has made many contributions to Bell Shakespeare's Teacher's Kits over the years. He is currently writing a book on Shakespeare.

COMPANY LIST

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Director	Anna Volska
Designer	Jennie Tate
Lighting Designer	Gavan Swift
Composer	Nigel Westlake
Movement Director	Gavin Robins
Hermia/Fairy/Flute	Georgia Adamson
Helena / Fairy/Starveling	Kate Box
Lysander/ Fairy /Snug	Simon Bossell
Demetrius / Fairy/Snout	Timothy Walter
Nick Bottom / Fairy	Mark Brady
Egeus / Peter Quince / Fairy	Tony Poli
Theseus / Oberon	Luciano Martucci
Hippolyta / Titania	Michelle Doake
Puck	Richard Gyoerffy
Stage Manager	Peter Giuliani
Assistant Stage Manager	Jessica Wong
Head Electrician	Patrick Buckle
Head Mechanist	Michael Harding
Set Construction	Jands Pty Ltd
Scenic Art	Scenographic Studios
Wardrobe Supervisor / Wardrobe Construction	Jo Beaton
Wardrobe Construction	Sarah Douglas
	Roger Tait
	Purl Harbour

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM SHORT SUMMARY

Celebrations are planned to mark the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Egeus comes before Theseus with his rebellious daughter Hermia, who is in love with Lysander, although her father is insisting that she marry Demetrius. The Duke orders Hermia that she obey her father or, according to Athenian Law, she must face death or enter a convent.

Hermia and Lysander decide to elope that night. They confide their plan to Hermia's best friend Helena. Helena is still in love with Demetrius, even though he doesn't love her anymore. Hoping to win back his affection, she tells him of the plan. That night, all four lovers steal away to the forest.

Bottom the weaver and a group of Athenian tradesmen are planning to perform a play, *The Tragedy Of Pyramus And Thisbe* in celebration of the Duke's wedding. They decide to rehearse that night in the same forest.

Oberon and Titania, fairy rulers of the forest, have quarrelled over Titania's refusal to give up her foster child to Oberon. He orders Puck to seek out a magic flower whose juice, squeezed on the eyes of someone asleep, will cause them to fall in love with the first creature they see on waking. Oberon uses the juice on Titania and she falls rapturously in love with Bottom, whom Puck has bewitched and turned into an ass.

Oberon also tells Puck to use it on Demetrius so that he might fall in love with Helena, but Puck, mistaking the two Athenian youths, uses it on Lysander instead who promptly falls in love with Helena. Trying to rectify his mistake, Puck puts the love juice on Demetrius' eyes and he too falls in love with Helena. Now both youths love Helena and hate Hermia!

Eventually, however, all the enchantments are lifted, the human lovers are happily paired Titania and Oberon are reconciled, and Bottom is returned to normal. The three couples are married and Bottom's acting troupe performs their play at the nuptial celebrations.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM SYNOPSIS

ACT I

SCENE 1

Set in Athens, the play begins four days before the marriage of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, the Amazon warrior queen whom he has fought and now won the right to marry. Theseus is very anxious to be married and speaks of the tediousness of time passing to the day of their wedding – *'but O, methinks how slow this old moon wanes'*. Hippolyta emphasises that there are only four days to wait and he must be patient.

Egeus enters with his daughter Hermia. Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius but Hermia loves Lysander. The Duke tells Hermia that she must marry Demetrius or face the consequences for disobeying her father. Referring to Ancient Athenian laws, she must live as a nun or be put to death.

Lysander tries to expose Demetrius as false because he *'made love to Nedar's daughter Helena'* and promised his love to her. Helena, Hermia's best friend is still in love with Demetrius and is desperately trying to win him back. But the Duke follows the law. Hermia must marry Demetrius or face the consequences.

So when Lysander and Hermia are left alone to say their goodbyes, Lysander tells Hermia that he has a plan to escape the Duke's harsh decision. He has a wealthy Aunt living outside of Athens. They will run away to live with her where *'the sharp Athenian law cannot pursue us'*, and plan to be married. Helena enters and asks Hermia what her special powers are that she is able to *'sway the motions of Demetrius's heart'*. Hermia and Lysander reassure Helena that once they gone from Athens, Demetrius will again give his attention to her.

In the hope of winning his love back, Helena decides to tell Demetrius that Hermia has run away with Lysander. She somehow knows that Demetrius will then follow them into the forest and so her plan is to follow him.

SCENE 2

The Mechanicals, a local amateur theatre group made up of trade and craftsmen is preparing to rehearse a play. They are trying to win a place as entertainers at the Duke's wedding. Director, Peter Quince, is casting *'The Most Lamentable Comedy And Most Cruel Death Of Pyramus And Thisbe'*. Quince wants the company's lead actor Nick Bottom to play Pyramus, but Bottom wants to play all of the other parts as well – Thisbe (the female lead role played by a young man), the lion and so forth. Finally, he agrees to take the part of the 'hero' Pyramus and the Mechanicals go away to learn their parts and meet in the palace wood that evening for rehearsal.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

As night falls the spirit world awakens. Fairies celebrate the evening as they await the arrival of their King (Oberon) and Queen (Titania). But Oberon and Titania have been fighting for some time. The Earth's weather has been badly affected by their arguments. She has a small Indian boy whom she is raising. Oberon wants the boy for himself but she refuses to give him up and their argument continues. So Oberon employs his head fairy, Puck, to find a special purple flower which possesses the power to cast love spells. Oberon plans to put a spell on Titania as she sleeps, so that when she wakes she will fall in love with *'the first live creature she sees.'*

As Puck departs and Helena and Demetrius enter. He is angry and is trying to get rid of her. She pleads with him to love her. She expresses her feelings over and over again but he is cruel and says he cannot love her. She continues to chase him. Oberon watches and notes Helena's dismay.

When Puck returns with magic flower Oberon gives him some of it and asks him to place a spell on Demetrius so that he will fall in love with Helena. *'Thou shalt know the youth by the Athenian garments he hath on.'*

SCENE 2

As Titania sleeps Oberon drops the love potion on her eyelids so that she will fall madly in love with the next living creature she lays eyes upon – *'be it ounce, or cat, or bear, Wake when some vile thing is near'*.

Hermia and Lysander enter. Hermia is exhausted. Lysander can't find the way to his Aunt's house. They sleep apart even though Lysander would prefer to sleep next to Hermia. While they are sleeping Puck enters. Assuming that Lysander and Hermia are actually Helena and Demetrius, he places the potion on the eyelids of Lysander.

Helena and Demetrius re-enter. Demetrius is still trying to shake Helena off and this time manages to get away from her, leaving her afraid and alone. She comes across Lysander sleeping on the ground and unsure whether he is *'dead or asleep'* wakes him. He instantly falls in love with her. She is angry at his advances and runs away. Lysander, now not caring about Hermia, leaves her sleeping and follows Helena in to the forest.

ACT 3

SCENE 1

The actors arrive in the forest to rehearse their play. They are not very good and Peter Quince becomes more and more annoyed. Puck, who is watching, decides to play a trick on them. While Bottom waits in the bushes for his cue, Puck casts a spell on him, changing Bottom into an ass. When he enters as this *'monster'*, all his fellow actors run away in fear. Not understanding why they have run away and to show them he is not afraid, he begins to sing. Titania, sleeping close by, is woken by his singing and instantly falls in love with him. Proclaiming her love for him she supplies him with an entourage of her fairies to wait on him and grant his every wish.

SCENE 2

Puck reports to Oberon that *'my mistress with a monster is in love.'* This is better

than Oberon had hoped!

However, Hermia enters now being pursued by Demetrius who is delighted to have found her. Hermia cannot understand why Lysander would have left her as he did and is convinced that Demetrius has done something to him– *'it cannot be but thou hast murdered him'*. Hermia exits looking for Lysander. Demetrius falls to the ground and sleeps.

Oberon is angry. Puck has put the love spell on the wrong youth. He must now find Helena and bring her to where Demetrius lies sleeping. Oberon remedies the mistake by placing a love spell on Demetrius to ensure he will fall in love with Helena.

Helena and Lysander enter arguing. As Demetrius wakes the first person he sees is Helena. Now both Demetrius and Lysander love Helena. She doubts everyone's honesty and assumes that they are all involved in this dreadful game to hurt her. A fight between the girls begins, Helena accusing Hermia of betraying her and the two young men challenging each other to fight while trying to give their attention to Helena.

'This is thy negligence' Oberon tells Puck and he must remedy the situation with haste. It is almost morning. Puck manipulates the lovers and they all fall asleep. Puck restores Lysander's love for Hermia leaving Demetrius still in love with Helena.

ACT 4

SCENE 1

Meanwhile, Titania proceeds to entertain, feed and love Bottom in his changed state. He is bemused but goes along with all the indulgences she lays upon him. Oberon watching, decides to release Titania from the spell. He tells Puck to remove the ass's head from Bottom. Apparently, Titania has agreed to give Oberon the changeling boy and Oberon now pities her.

Oberon restores Titania to her usual self and she awakes thinking she has been dreaming of being loved by an ass. She is shocked to find Bottom sleeping next to her but now seemingly forgets her fight with Oberon. They leave together as dawn is breaking.

Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus, who are on an early morning hunt, find the young lovers asleep on the ground together. Lysander tells them of his intended elopement with Hermia. Egeus demands his execution for attempting to prevent Hermia's marriage to Demetrius. But Demetrius announces his intention to marry Helena. Theseus is delighted and declares that they are all to be married when he and Hippolyta are married.

Bottom wakes and cannot fathom what happened to him during the night and believes he has been dreaming. He decides to write a play which he will call 'Bottom's Dream' because *'it hath no bottom.'*

SCENE 2

The actors wonder where Bottom could be and whether he has survived. They hear that the three couples will be married together. Bottom returns to them ready for

more rehearsal, announces that *'our play is preferred'* and they are all overjoyed.

ACT 5

SCENE 1

Theseus rejects the lover's experiences in the woods as madness, *'Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends'*. *Pyramus And Thisbe* is performed by The Mechanicals at the wedding feast. It is hard for the audience to take the actors seriously. They joke together about the actors performances and the play. Theseus finally approves of their execution of the play but asks them not to play the epilogue. When everyone departs, the fairies, led by Oberon and Titania, arrive to bless the marriages. Puck is the last to speak suggesting that the remedy for any offence the audience may feel is to think of the fairies as *'shadows'* and *'that you have but slumber'd here,/ While these visions did appear; And this weak and idle theme,/No more yielding but a dream.'*

LESSON ONE

RELATIONSHIPS AND THEMES IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* BY PETA DOWNES

It has been suggested that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was probably written by Shakespeare somewhere around 1596, not long after he penned *Romeo And Juliet*. Appearing relatively early in Shakespeare's canon, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is referred to by many as his first masterpiece. It cleverly weaves together four different narratives in a thematic fusion of love and marriage, imagination and dreams, social law and natural order. It is thought that the play might have been originally given as a private performance, possibly commissioned for the occasion of a wedding of one of Shakespeare's close friends. Whether this is historically true or not is anyone's guess, but the fact that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a lively dramatic commentary about how people can sustain a loving relationship and commit themselves to one person for life, certainly makes the idea plausible. In writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare's entertaining wedding gift has given both the intended couple and audiences for the past four hundred or so years a lesson about love and marriage.

Pitting the social occasion of a royal wedding against the rite of passage of four young lovers, a madcap rehearsal of a comical tragic play about love, and the Fairy Kingdom at war with itself, Shakespeare combines morals and mirth to enable the audience to walk away feeling enlightened and enlivened by the play's enchanting story and themes.

The play revolves around marriage – Theseus to Hippolyta, Hermia to Lysander, Helena to Demetrius and of course, the fractured relationship of Oberon and Titania, the Fairy King and Queen, whose relationship brings about the confusions of the plot and the eventual happy ending. The dream-like realm of midsummer's eve in a moonlit magical forest becomes the perfect setting for these young lovers to realise the truth of their relationships and for their perceptions of love to be altered irrevocably.

Love is a many splendoured thing

Love is the first major theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Helena, the young lover who has been the most abused by love, sums up the play's attitude towards the theme quite succinctly:

Helena **Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.
Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste;
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.
And therefore is love said to be a child
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.
As waggish boys in game themselves forswear,
So the boy Love is perjured everywhere**

Act 1, Scene 1

As Helena suggests, love, or in this case Cupid, is not only blind but it behaves in a childish manner that enthralls its victims and overthrows normal behaviour. Love is blind because it is above intellect, and that blindness gives fulfilment to fantasy and illusion. The mind in this case, becomes desire and imagination (Jan Kott, 1967, p180). How love affects each character is an essential part of the play and Shakespeare loses little time in showing us some common stages of being in love, differentiated through the age, perception and experience of the play's characters.

There are five couples in the play whose respective relationships present various stages: love that is idealistic broken, mature, jealous, obsessive, lustful or fantastical. Some couples have been at war with each other and found peace, others are hopelessly lost in the romance of being in love, and several have reached or are about to reach breaking point. The first indication that the journey of love towards marriage will feature strongly in the thematic landscape is the fact that the play begins amid preparations for a royal wedding.

Theseus And Hippolyta

*I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries*
Act 1, Scene 1

The Duke Theseus and his Amazonian bride Hippolyta have only four more days and nights to wait until their relationship is sealed in marriage. Theseus is a battle-scarred general of the highest regard and Hippolyta the accomplished warrior queen of the Amazons. He is a legendary Greek and she is a captured foreigner who until recently was an enemy of both Theseus and Athens. They are opposites who share the common bond of war but have settled on peace. After what has been a long and turbulent wooing, Theseus has literally won Hippolyta's hand and cannot wait to claim his prize.

Theseus **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 triumph and with revelling...**

Act 1, Scene 1

Whether Hippolyta shares the same enthusiasm for the match is uncertain, but there is a level of acquiescence in the way that she relates to Theseus, and it is clear that their relationship has reached the stage of mutual understanding.

Hermia And Lysander

The course of true love never did run smooth
Act 1, Scene 1

Anticipation of this regal wedding is interrupted by the threat of another wedding in which mutual love and understanding is not present. Hermia's father Egeus attempts to enforce a marriage between his only daughter and Demetrius, a young man whom he has chosen to be her bridegroom. But Hermia is in love with Lysander, a young man Egeus detests apparently because Lysander represents all the romantic ideals of the lover.

Egeus **Thou, thou, Lysander, thou has given her rhymes,
And interchang'd love-tokens with my child:
Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung
With faining voices verses of feigning love,
And stol'n the impression of her fantasy
With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits,
Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats (messengers
Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth):
With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart,
Turn'd her obedience (which is due to me)
To stubborn harshness...**

Act 1, Scene 1

Hermia is unabashed in her defence and approaches Theseus candidly, declaring that she wished her father could look with her eyes. Lysander is equally frank, stating that he is equal to Demetrius with the exception that he has Hermia's love, and that as Demetrius has Egeus' love he would do better to marry him.

Lysander **I am, my lord, as well deriv'd as he,
As well possess'd; my love is more than his;
My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd,
If not with vantage, as Demetrius';
And, which is more than all these boasts can be,
I am belov'd of beauteous Hermia.
Why should not I then prosecute my right?...**

Act 1, Scene 1

It is obvious from Lysander's impassioned pleas to Theseus, and Hermia's outspokenness, that both lovers share a somewhat clichéd attitude towards their love: that if love is true then it is meant to be difficult.

Lysander **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...**

Act 1, Scene 1, 132-4

Hermia **If then true lovers have been ever cross'd
It stands as an edict in destiny.
Then let us teach our trial patience,
Because it is a customary cross,
As due to love as thoughts and dreams and sighs,
Wishes and tears, poor fancy's followers...**

Act 1, Scene 1, 150-5

They decide that they would rather banish themselves from Athens, elope to the forest and be wed in secret, than be torn apart by an ancient law that demands Hermia obey her father. This couple are at the stage of imagining what being in love is like and are yet to experience its reality.

Demetrius And Helena

So he dissolved and showers of oaths did melt

Act 1, Scene 1

Why Demetrius is deemed the perfect match for Hermia is unclear. Possibly he's an old family friend or maybe he has land or titles that Egeus finds attractive. The reason for this favouritism is never commented upon by Egeus. Demetrius is the chosen one and he acts accordingly, openly swearing his love for Hermia and urging her to relent and consider him. Lysander thinks that Demetrius' love for Hermia is a bit sudden and suspicious because of his recent liaison with Helena, Hermia's best friend. It was to Helena that Demetrius swore an oath of love and then just as resolutely changed his mind.

Lysander **Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head,
Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,
And won her soul: and she, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
Upon this spotted and inconstant man...**

Act 1, Scene 1

Demetrius is repulsed by the very thought of Helena who's plight is at once heart-breaking and all too familiar to those that have lost in the game of love. She still loves Demetrius with uncontrollable passion and refuses to believe that he has forsaken her. As Demetrius has given no real reason for their break-up, Helena is left to believe that Hermia has bewitched him with her charms.

Helena **How happy some o'er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know;
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I admiring of his qualities...**

Act 1, Scene 2, 226-31

**For, ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne,
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolv'd and showers of oaths did melt...**

Act 1, Scene 2, 242-45

This forces Helena to think of under-handed ways of winning her love back, and she doesn't stop at betraying her friend.

Helena **I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight,
Then to the wood will he, tomorrow night,
Pursue her; and for this intelligence
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense.
But herein mean I to enrich my pain,
To have his sight thither and back again...**

Act 1, Scene 2, 246-51

Helena has lost all self-respect because she has been jilted after Demetrius' promise of love – a promise which was virtually considered betrothal in Elizabethan times. The next time we see her, she is pursuing Demetrius through the forest, begging for his love.

Demetrius **Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?
Or rather do I not in plainest truth
Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?**

Helena **And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
What worser place can I beg in your love –
And yet a place of high respect with me –
Than to be used as you use your dog?...**

Act 2, Scene 1, 199-210

This couple present the obsessive and repulsive stages of love, as well as the painful aspects.

Oberon And Titania

Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.

Act 2, Scene 1

The most natural relationship in the play, Oberon and Titania, the fairy King and Queen are involved in an ancient marriage of passion and power that keeps the world harmoniously balanced. When they argue, which is what they have been doing for quite some time, the mortal world is plunged into chaos and disorder.

Puck **The King doth keep his revels here tonight;
Take heed the Queen come not within his sight;
For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
Because that she as her attendant hath
A lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king –
She never had so sweet a changeling;
And jealous Oberon would have the child
Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild:
But she perforce withholds the loved boy,
(cont.) **Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all
her joy.
And now they never meet in grove or green,
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,
But they do square; that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn-cups, and hide them there...**
Act 2, Scene 1, 18-31**

When they finally meet, which is not long after Puck's speech (above), Oberon and Titania are both as unreasonable as the other, and their petty argument over the possession of a little Indian boy seems to be just an excuse to challenge the balance

of power within their relationship.

Oberon's decision to punish Titania for her belligerence effectively sets in motion a chain of events that will bring all of the couples together. This is love that is jealous and stubborn, love that uses knowledge as a weapon and love that will eventually be made stronger when forgiveness is found.

Titania And Bottom

My mistress with a monster is in love

Act 3, Scene 2

This is possibly the most ridiculous coupling of characters in the play and at the same time, one could argue most beautiful. With the help of a love potion applied by the jealous Oberon, Titania the fairy Queen falls in love with an ass, a creature that the hapless actor Bottom has been transformed into. This relationship represents the darker side of love, where lust and fantasy reside. *Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind* says Helena and in this instance love is found through imagined circumstances rather than reality.

As well as showing the different stages of love through each couple, Shakespeare gives his young lovers an opportunity to stand in each other's shoes, albeit briefly. Hermia and Lysander, originally superior and conceited about their love for each other are exposed to the same experiences as Helena and Demetrius, if only for one night. Lysander becomes a 'Demetrius' through being unfaithful and not returning Hermia's love for him. Hermia experiences how Helena feels when her love is not returned. Helena realises that being loved like Hermia isn't that great after all and Demetrius realises what it is like not to be loved and be powerless to change that.

Through the intertwining stories of all five couples, the audience is exposed to the changing face of love and witness each character's journey towards acceptance in a loving relationship. Inextricably linked to these journeys are the ideas of dreams and the imagination.

Discussion Questions

1. What is love?

Students might like to offer what they think love is even if they have yet to experience it themselves in those terms.

2. What is the difference between the love we see around us and the stories we read and the films we see about love?

Students might like to discuss how much of our perception about love is coloured by personal experience, magazines, romance novels or Hollywood.

3. Is there such a thing as love at first sight?

Students might like to discuss this idea with reference to the contemporary ideas about love that they have previously offered.

THE LUNATIC, THE LOVER AND THE POET ARE OF *IMAGINATION* ALL COMPACT...

When we imagine, we put aside reason to entertain fantasy. Imagination can be wishful thinking or deep-seated fear, where the possibility of the idea has a strong chance of becoming real. Imagination can also lead to illusion, where desire or fantasy causes more to be perceived than is actually there. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare suggests that the imagination of someone in love sees greatness in the most trivial of things and is easily led to believe that this is reality.

This theme focuses on how emotions, however irrational, colour perception and how fantasy and imagination influence how we see the world and behave towards each other. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, imagination transforms impossible things into reality.

Imagination And Transformation

Theseus Lovers and madmen have such **seething brains**,
Such **shaping fantasies**, that **apprehend**
More than **cool reason** ever **comprehends**.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of **imagination** all compact:
One **sees** more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman: the lover, all as **frantic**,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth **glance** from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as **imagination** bodies forth
The **forms of things unknown**, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and **gives to airy nothing**
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath **strong imagination**,
That if it would but **apprehend** some joy,
It **comprehends** some bringer of that joy:
Or, in the night, **imagining some fear**,
How easy is a bush **suppos'd** a bear!...

Act 5, Scene 1, 4-22

As outlined above, Theseus quickly dismisses the strange events told to him by the lovers as overactive imaginings brought on by the natural effects of love, comparing them to madmen and poets. The poet's imagination was supposedly beyond that of a normal human being and their job was to translate the natural world into a place filled with fantasy and illusion. But imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is as much about perception of self and imagined circumstances as it is about love, poetry or madness.

The imaginations of Hermia and Lysander lead them to believe that they will be happy running away together. They imagine and believe that all they need to sustain their relationship is the presence of their partner and the knowledge that they are loved. Their perceptions are drawn from what they *think* they know about love. They imagine a life where ancient laws and fathers will not get in their way. This

relationship is inexperienced, built on the romantic notions of other lovers; verses of love composed by wistful poets, stories they have read about what to expect from true love and what they must endure. Their love is an act of imagination soon to get a big dose of reality.

As the spurned lover, Helena's imagination has been working overtime since her relationship with Demetrius deteriorated. Possibly she has had countless thoughts as to what went wrong with Demetrius, trying to figure out where she went wrong. Eventually she turns to Hermia and blames her beauty. In Helena's mind she is as ugly as a bear compared to Hermia. Her fantasy is that Demetrius will be hers again if she can just get him on his own. She imagines how Demetrius will thank her for her consideration in telling him about Hermia running away, and then suddenly realise he is in love with her after all. Helena refuses to accept Demetrius does not love her. She would rather live with the vain hope and her imaginings than admit defeat.

Bottom imagines himself to be a great actor and his ample imagination is supported by the rest of his acting troupe, who know what he is capable of (which is probably better than anything they can muster). Playing such roles as Hercules (Ercles) and Samson have given him the confidence to tackle the great leading roles, but also the flexibility to transform into a lion or a young woman if required. Bottom's inflated imagination is part of his charm and something that serves him well when he comes face to face with the Fairy Queen and her entourage. As Theseus points out, a poet's (or in this case, an actor's) mind is already stretched to greet the absurdities of life as if they were an everyday occurrence and to transform them into art. Bottom's experience with Titania becomes a ballad called '*Bottom's Dream*', a title given to the song *because it has no bottom*, much like our hero's imagination.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the word imagination mean to you?

Students might like to discuss how imagination works for them in every day life and how it changes their perceptions.

2. What would life be like without imagination?

Students might like to discuss how the absence of imagination would affect the characters in Shakespeare's play as well as their own life.

3. How else does imagination exist in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

Students might like to look closely at the couples and suggest how the use of imagination affects their relationship, or cite different examples of imagination from Shakespeare's storyline.

WE ARE SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

'No one is sure, apart from faith, whether he is awake or asleep, seeing that during sleep we believe that we are awake as firmly as we do when we are awake. We believe we see spaces, figures, movements; we experience the passage of time, we measure it; and in fact we behave just as when we are awake. We spend half of our life asleep, in which condition, as we ourselves admit, we have no idea of truth, whatever we imagine, since all our perceptions are then illusory.' Pascal; *Pensees* (1662)

Dreams are used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to explain the fantastical things that happen to six of the play's characters: the four Lovers, Titania and Bottom. Being in or having a dream excuses the extraordinary behaviour of the individual and alleviates the embarrassing thought that the action actually might have occurred.

In dreams we are allowed to escape to a reality that has no boundaries, where our every-day behaviour can suddenly change and surprise us upon waking. When things are a dream they can be easily dismissed, but the desire that is beneath the façade lingers and disturbs us.

The first mention of dreams in the play comes from the character Hippolyta, who states that *four days will quickly steep themselves in night, four nights will quickly dream away the time* (Act 1, Scene 1, 7-8), suggesting that the time left waiting for her impending marriage to Theseus will be spent dreaming of what is to come in their relationship. The dream of the play's title is usually taken to be the experience the lovers have in the forest, where they come face to face with a topsy-turvy world and the nightmare of a possible reality. Closely connected to the Shakespeare's idea of imagination, the lover's dream becomes a metaphor for the revelation of true or underlying nature: what is imagined becomes real, what is not imagined becomes possible.

Under the spell of the flower's love juice, Lysander reveals that he is really fickle, nasty, violent and contemptuous. All of the romantic feelings and words that he has espoused to Hermia under the guise of true love quickly disappear. In this instance, the love juice becomes a truth serum and Hermia is confronted with her lover in a way that she never thought possible. Demetrius loses his steely demeanour, pleading for Helena to have him back and challenging Lysander to fight for her hand – an action that belies a romantic attitude towards love that we haven't seen before in his character.

Helena is confronted with both the truth and what she has imagined – that Demetrius really loves her and has just been bewitched by Hermia – and the truth that she has ignored – that Demetrius is so full of hate for her that he is willing to perjure himself in order to ridicule her. Even though Helena and Hermia are not given the love juice, they also become victims of its power. While trying to work out what is going on with the male lovers, they suddenly find themselves in a situation where accusations of betrayal are thrown and jealous feelings are confessed. Their sweet dispositions founder and a cat-fight ensues.

When the lovers awake the next morning, they are ashamed of what they believe they have dreamed. But the night has liberated them from their previous incarnations. Because they were really themselves in their dreams, all fantasy and

illusion they have about love and their relationships with each other has disappeared. They can see clearly now because the fog has literally been lifted from their eyes and minds.

It is interesting to also ponder the idea that the dream of the title could also be a reference to Bottom's dream. In light of what Theseus says, it seems quite logical that an actor like Bottom (or Shakespeare) could write such a play. Perhaps Bottom and Shakespeare are interchangeable and this is really some fanciful dream that Shakespeare awoke from and quickly wrote down to use as material later.

Discussion Questions

1. When we dream we are examining our sub-conscious mind.

The students might like to agree/disagree with this statement and consider how their dreams affect their waking life.

2. What is the difference between a dream and a nightmare?

It might be interesting for the students to identify how fear and desire is differentiated in dreams.

3. How do the 'dreams' that the four Lovers, Bottom and Titania have effect the way that they behave for the rest of the play?

This may be a point to reference as the students read through Act 4 and 5 of the play.

Suggested Activities

ACTIVITY 1

Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence – Henry Louis Mencken

The heart has its reason, of which the mind knows nothing – Blaise Pascal

In dreams and in love there are no impossibilities – Janos Arany

Love is a canvas furnished by Nature and embroidered by imagination – Voltaire

Love conquers all; let us yield to love – Virgil

Look at these five statements and try matching them to the characters and the relationships you recognise from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Titania and Bottom, Oberon and Titania, Theseus and Hippolyta. Who would say what about love and why? Ask students to support their answers with references to the play.

ACTIVITY 2

Love is blind

What does this sentence mean to you and do you agree with it?

Ask the students to form opposing teams, for or against the statement. Ask them to construct an argument using examples from Act 1 Scene 2 or Act 2 Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Hermia and Lysander discuss their situation, or Helena follows Demetrius into the woods and tries to persuade him to love her.

LESSON TWO

NATURE AND SOCIAL ORDER IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

When *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins, the environment is in chaos and nature's rhythm has been disturbed. Shakespeare attributes this natural disaster to the ongoing fight between the Fairy King, Oberon and his Queen, Titania over the possession of a little Indian boy. The Athenian forest is the enchanted realm of the fairies and when the Lovers and the Mechanicals enter, they do so at their peril.

Through the fairy world and its characters, Shakespeare brings Nature to life. By making Nature like humankind and reducing them in size, he enables the human characters to physically interact with the forces of Nature that govern them.

Fundamentally, two forces set Shakespeare's comedy in motion: a conflict between law and justice where an abuse of power creates instability in a household or society; and/or the arrival of travellers or strangers who have good cause to be discontented and insecure. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare chooses the former.

Hermia banishes herself by fleeing to the Athenian forest when she is ordered by Theseus to obey her father's will and marry Demetrius. Here the forest offers the lovers respite and takes on the role of soother, comforter and healer, distancing them from the previous stress of Theseus' court and offering a new beginning.

Shakespeare understood that there is nothing quite like a change of scene to bring about a change of mind. The natural landscape is strongly evident in Shakespeare's comedies, with stories of adventure, discovery, romance and magic set against the backdrop of the sea, the rain and the forest. The forest, a place for exiles and natural behaviour, is a place where social law and conduct is abandoned and where Shakespeare's characters can find freedom, lack of inhibition and the truth about themselves.

All will be made right in the forest, and the forest is certainly a place of happy memories for the young lovers Lysander and Hermia, where they met once '*to do observance to a morn of May*'. With the pleasurable memory of two young girls lying and giggling together on '*faint primrose beds*', we might easily imagine the forest of Athens to be a place where nothing could really go wrong. But we have to remember the discord between Oberon and Titania and its effects on the natural world, which have brought the seasons into turmoil:

Titania **No night is now with hymn or carol blest.
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons 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, as in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,**

By their increase, now knows not which is which
Act 2, Scene 1, 102-14

So these woods are not really the romantic fairytale forest that the lovers imagine they will be, but that is the least of their worries. They soon discover that there are other natural and supernatural elements at hand to steer them towards the true nature of love.

Midsummer Eve

Shakespeare's choice of season and time of the play's action was not arbitrary. There is an ancient folk belief that extreme heat can cause madness. The higher the sun and the longer it beats down, the more likely you are to get sunstroke. Midsummer, then, is the time when people are most likely to imagine fantastic experiences. The Summer Solstice (Midsummer) falls at the precise moment when the Sun's power is at its highest point. It is the longest day and the shortest night of the year.

Midsummer has been one of the important solar events throughout the evolution of humankind. It was an indicator that the year was about to begin waning, and winter would again be returning. Midsummer celebrations begin with Midsummer Eve, as the Celts and many ancient civilizations believed that the beginning of the day occurred at dream-time or nightfall.

Midsummer was also the time when everything was abundant and flourishing. Flowers would smell their sweetest, colours were their most vibrant, trees were their greenest, berries were their sweetest, and fairies were their most playful. It was said that during a full moon on Midsummer Eve a mortal could witness fairy dances and celebrations. The moon of Midsummer was given the name of Honey Moon, as this is the time when the hives were rich in honey, which has been gathered and fermented into a drink known as mead, customarily drunk at wedding parties.

Divination on matters of love were especially powerful on Midsummer's Eve. Thought to be the season of passion, will, strength and soothing love, Midsummer was the perfect time to understand the dynamic aspects of passion and the corresponding gentle aspects that love can bestow.

The Moon, like to a silver bow

The moon, a symbol of fertility and the ever-changing cycles of nature. Tides are governed by the moon and its energy is said to evoke a type of madness in men as well as sexuality and fertility in women.

Each of the four groups of characters makes strong references to the moon and moonlight, and they are referred to approximately forty times. Hippolyta compares the new moon to a silver bow, reminiscing perhaps on her former warrior status and that the Goddess of the moon is Diana, the virgin huntress of the woods – a goddess that the Amazons worshipped. Perhaps she is musing the loss of her independence and her huntress-warrior past, in her forthcoming marriage. Regardless of the exact inference, the moon is changing, moving through a new cycle in the same way all lovers do.

Egeus complains that Lysander has won Hermia's affection by singing at her window by moonlight, and Lysander and Hermia plot to meet in the wood at night when the moon ...*doth behold her silver visage in the wat'ry glass* (Act 1, Scene 2, 210), inferring that the moon will be enough to light their escape. The mechanicals meet by moonlight and are concerned as to how to bring moonlight into the Duke's palace. Even Oberon's opening greeting to Titania is *Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania* (Act 2, Scene 1, 60).

In the moonlit wood, away from the strong light of day, changes occur. Yet, paradoxically, the moon, although constantly changing, remains constant. Every new moon will be a silver crescent, there will always recur a full moon; in every cycle the moon will pass through the same phases. Here Shakespeare uses the analogy of the moon as a message that we all must change, yet as human beings there is a commonality in our nature.

The Little Western Flower

Love is an irrational force, especially when it is induced by the love juice from the little western flower that Oberon sends Puck to gather for him, so that he may use it to exact his revenge on Titania. Shakespeare gives love's power over to the fairy world and introduces us to his theories on how love works through the physical entity of this flower that Oberon calls '*love-in-idleness*'; a flower that is '*purple with love's wound*'.

Oberon **Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it 'love-in-idleness'.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I show'd thee once.
The juice of it, on sleeping eyelids laid,
Will make or man or woman madly dote
On the next live creature that it sees...**

Act 2, Scene 1, 165-172

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the flower is as much a symbol of Nature as it is a symbol of love, but it can also be construed as a malevolent instrument, tricking unsuspecting victims into loving at first sight. Being struck down by its power is not unlike that of being struck by Cupid's arrow (which makes sense when you consider it was Cupid's arrow that infected it in the first place), and we know how childish he can be. The flower is commonly known as the pansy, although one may imagine a more exotic flower in its place. In the hands of Nature, or in this circumstance Puck and Oberon, the flower becomes a weapon that can render its victim powerless to resist the attraction of another, and creates the illusion of love.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Nature exist in the human world of the play?

Students might like to discuss how the natural tendencies of the characters are overthrown or diminished by social codes of behaviour.

2. What happens to the behaviour of the human characters when they are exposed to Nature?

Students might like to make reference to and compare the behaviour of the characters in the 'court' and 'forest' scenes.

3. What do you think Shakespeare is saying about Nature and love?

Students might like to make reference to their earlier discussions about what love is.

Suggested Activity

What's in a name?

Write the title of the play on the board and ask the pupils to call out key words or phrases associated with each word. Students are asked to look at each of the words in the title individually and brainstorm them separately for the ideas they suggest about the play.

Some examples:

Midsummer – the longest day, hot, fun, holiday, adventure, pagan celebration

Night – dark, secretive, spooky, witching hour

Dream – fantasy, take you away from reality, transport to another world, anything is possible, escape who you are and become what you want to be, hope.

SOCIAL ORDER, MARRIAGE AND FATHER/DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN SHAKESPEARE

I would my father look'd but with my eyes
Act 1, Scene 1

Social Order

The social order and human laws of Athens are given secondary focus when placed against Nature and the Fairy world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it is important to remember that Hermia's plight to escape her father's will and the ancient Athenian law is the storyline that begins the play's dramatic action. The social order in this instance is to do with ancient laws, customs and parent/child relationships.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus and Hippolyta exist like a frame around a picture, a static element surrounding the movement within. But although they only appear in three scenes, their importance should not be overlooked. They provide an example of mature love that sets the standard for others to follow, and their court provides the reality that the lovers return to after their dream-like adventures. But there is another reason for their presence in the dramatic action, particularly in the case of Theseus. Theseus is the Duke of Athens and therefore represents the state in matters of law and justice. As the ruler, it is his duty to uphold the social order of his dukedom and preserve the customs and traditions that have been set in place. With this in mind, Egeus brings the issue of his daughter's disobedience to Theseus for resolution and thus the dramatic conflict of the play begins.

Egeus' request that Theseus resolve his argument with Hermia addresses two vital issues in relation to social order in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the law, where it is written that a father has power over his daughter to do with her as he pleases, and that the daughter has a duty to be obedient to her father's will; and tradition, where the father wishes to evoke the rites of marriage that are a part of that society's fabric and the daughter wishes to go against that archaic tradition.

Although Theseus might like to embrace the choice of love in marriage, as he himself is doing by marrying Hippolyta, he is powerless to overthrow the Ancient law of Athens. He is its guardian not its creator, and the law cannot be mitigated or interfered with. If Egeus had simply asked Theseus to help make a decision regarding who was the better suitor, it is more than likely that Theseus would have been able to act and give Hermia's hand to Lysander. In this circumstance, Theseus would have the power to overthrow custom and set new standards. But instead, Egeus invokes the Ancient law of Athens to force Hermia to obey him, and Theseus, as nominated upholder of this law, has no other choice but to offer Hermia either the hand of Demetrius, holy solitude or death.

Although the play is set in Greece, it was intended for an English audience during the reign of Elizabeth I. At the time that the play was written, marriage in the middle to upper classes of that society was for political alignment, or for the establishment and preservation of wealth and power. The nomination of the bridegroom was often influenced by parental choice and nothing at all to do with the desires of the bride-to-be. How a young woman was chosen by her husband-to-be was a far cry from the romantic notions of love and courtship that lovers aspire to today.

The Rites Of Marriage

To marry or not to marry, that is the question today for many young men and women. Why, when tradition and social law has almost ceased to insist upon it, do we marry? Perhaps it is still for social position, money, political strategy, a dowry, security, safety or even love as it was in Shakespeare's day. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare offers reasons for why we marry and questions the traditions of betrothal as much as he looks at the foolish things that love makes us do.

In ancient Athens, where the play is set, marriages tended to be a means of allying two families, each with something to offer the other. When the time came, ideally while still in adolescence, women were given in marriage to an Athenian man. The fact that the woman might not love a husband imposed upon her would not be considered important by most Athenians. Normally, marriages were not based on love but on the prospect of a good partnership for the future. Love and respect between husband and wife were hopefully going to develop as time went by. Interestingly, this was probably not known to Shakespeare as historical fact. It could have been derived from his scant knowledge of Greek philosophy, but it seems more likely that he supplanted the customs and traditions of his own time to fill out the dramatic equation of a loveless marriage that faces Hermia.

When it came to marriage for couples in Shakespeare's time, there was a lot at stake for the upper classes. Marriage had more to do with business than it did with love. Marriage was about who you were, what you owned and what you could acquire through the marriage. The amount of property that would be inherited could be quite substantial. Marriage was looked at as a way of joining two powerful families and making sure there would be peace. Where huge fortunes were not the issue, personal preference carried a greater weight. The decision of the parents and opinions of friends and families was important, but a couple's desire to wed could take precedence over the parent's decision if they had enough money to set-up a household.

In the case of Hermia being allowed to marry Lysander, love does conquer all. Theseus, possibly taking advantage of Egeus' confusion at finding the four lovers in pairs of their own choosing, hastily arranges the marriages of both couples on the same day as his own.

Theseus **Fair lovers, you are fortunately met;
Of this discourse we more will hear anon.
Egeus, I will overbear your will;
For in the temple, by and by, with us,
These couples shall eternally be knit...**

Act 4, Scene 1, 176-80

There is the view that Theseus gives this judgement in favour of the lovers out of sheer political expediency. It is his wedding day and his joy is so infectious, who would dare to challenge his overruling? But then, the law is still the law. What has changed that removes Egeus' rights in respect of his daughter? Demetrius may no longer wish to marry his daughter, but does that preclude Egeus' *right to dispose of her*? Theseus' ultimate decision upon the young lovers is important in considering such a question. It can be said that when Theseus overrules Egeus and brings about a happy result for them, he acts out of cool reasoning, seeing that they are now

sufficiently mature and certain in their own hearts and minds to decide their own futures.

Fathers And Daughters

The relationship between fathers and daughters played a large part in the dramatic conflict of both tragedies and comedies and was not uncommon in plays before and during Shakespeare's time. In fact, the theme of a daughter who wants to marry against her father's desires was very popular in the Roman comedies that preceded Shakespeare's own plays.

When it came to fathers and their daughters, Shakespeare portrayed the relationship as a bond of deep significance. This conflicting or congenial familial bond was central to twenty one of his thirty seven plays, from the early *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona* to his late play *The Tempest*. The father of two daughters himself, he explored this relationship throughout these twenty-one plays, making reference to the many possible degrees and guises of love that could exist between a father and his daughter.

Shakespeare's plays repeatedly depict fathers at the middle or end stage of their life, reluctantly releasing their daughters into the adult commitment of marriage. Unwilling to face the prospect of aging and death, most of them cling to their daughters, demanding that they remain obedient children, while reinforcing their own illusions of masculine potency and control. For some fathers there is no struggle to release, but a struggle to accept the man that his daughter has chosen to be her husband. These daughters are blossoming into passionate young women, their sexuality is awakening and this creates a tempestuous confrontation between the father's power and the ardour of young love. Shakespeare's fathers and daughters explore the challenges and crises of adult development for both children and parents.

This is the case for the three father and daughter relationships that Shakespeare makes direct and indirect reference to in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hermia and Egeus, Thisbe and her father, Juliet and Capulet.

Hermia And Egeus

The first time we meet Egeus, he is the disparaging father who has come to make a formal complaint against his daughter, dragging Hermia and her two suitors with him into court. From the level of his vexation, we imagine that Egeus has tried every form of persuasion he can to try and change Hermia's mind about Demetrius, and he is now playing his trump card. Alternatively, he may have discovered the lovers in a romantic tryst (not unlike Romeo and Juliet's balcony scene) and decided to end their relationship as quickly as possible by enforcing his parental power within the law.

As a father, Egeus doesn't seem to be an unloving tyrant and his complaint is merely the story of a rebelling daughter. To Egeus the idea of marrying for love is irrational. Hermia pleads for feelings and her father for reasons. The law declares that female children should be totally subservient to their father: *As she is mine, I may dispose of her* (Act 1, Scene 1, 42). The play poses the problem of woman's condition in this society and Hermia's attitude towards her father reflects the mind of a young determined woman who sees this law of parental power over the female child as unfair and ridiculous.

But in the end, Egeus has little power over Hermia. He only appears in two scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first scene, when he complains to Theseus, and the third last scene, when he, along with Theseus and Hippolyta discover the sleeping lovers in the forest. It is interesting to note that he is absent from the wedding feast at the end of the play. His argument in the second scene for enforcement of the law and the death of Lysander for daring to run away with Hermia, falls on deaf ears. It is obvious to all present that the law of nature, that is love, has taken precedence over the archaic law that upheld loveless arranged marriages. Egeus is left speechless and, powerless to overthrow this law, he must accept his daughter's will.

Thisbe And Her Father

The Legend Of Pyramus And Thisbe is a Babylonian tale told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (a constant source of ideas for Shakespeare) which is said to have inspired Shakespeare's earlier play *Romeo And Juliet*. The wall that separates the houses of the two lovers is the only point of reference that we have regarding Thisbe's relationship with her father. But the fact that the wall has been erected to such a great height that the lovers can only speak through a crack found in its base, indicates a protective and restrictive relationship, not unlike that of Juliet and her father Capulet. Thisbe is not allowed to venture beyond the wall where she might see or touch her love, and we can assume that when and if she does venture into the public arena, it will be under the strictest parental guidance.

As we are not privy to a conversation between Thisbe and her father, we can only imagine how absolutely horrified he was to learn of her dalliance with the boy next door. Whether or not he had other marital plans for his daughter is not inferred in the tale, but it is clear that he does not approve of the match. There is no talk of elopement when the lovers talk through the crack in the wall, but it seems fairly obvious from the way that she runs off to the forest with her beloved Pyramus that she is not just going there to pick berries! Just like Juliet, the character that Thisbe supposedly generates, Thisbe is so much in love that she is willing to incur the wrath of her father or die for her love if she is parted from Pyramus. Which of course is also her shared fate with Juliet.

Juliet And Capulet

When we first meet Capulet, Juliet's father, he is being admonished by the Prince of Verona for the bandying in the streets that has occurred between his kinsmen and those of Montague, Romeo's father. It becomes obvious that Capulet is a citizen of great standing and importance, and the benevolent patriarch of his extended family. In the next scene, we witness his conversation with Paris, a young man who is a willing suitor to thirteen year old Juliet, Capulet's daughter and only child. As Paris is a cousin of the Prince, this seems to be an excellent political strategy, but Capulet insists that Paris capture her heart before he will give his consent to the match. His love for his daughter has compelled him to organise a party for his kinsmen, to which Paris is invited and where Capulet hopes this wooing may occur.

At this point Juliet appears, in relationship to her mother and her nurse rather than her father, and her lack of disagreement over Paris' suit and her willingness to be obedient to her parents' choice of husband show her to be her father's daughter and ruled by him. Capulet features in Act 1, showing himself to be actively involved in

society and then disappears until Act 3 when Tybalt is slain, although he does not speak at this event.

When he reappears in the fifth scene of Act 3, he does so with such words of terror and wrath that we can hardly believe he is the same loving father that insisted Paris win the heart of his daughter. But Juliet is not the same girl that she once was. In this scene, she is a young woman in love, protective of her husband and defiant of her father's will, in much the same way as Hermia behaves. She tries to manipulate the situation with her father by using her previous relationship as dutiful daughter, but he sees through her words. His threats to *drag her on a hurdle thither* and make her wed Paris or *never after look me in the face betray the goods*. There is no getting around her father's power. Juliet has no other choice but to drink the sleeping potion and pretend to be dead, in the hope that she will avoid the impending marriage to Paris and be reunited with her secret husband Romeo.

Through these examples of the father and daughter relationship it becomes apparent that Shakespeare was quite critical of the social laws and customs of his time when it came to the rights and desires of the individual, particularly women, and the business of marriage. Although the character of Egeus and his ancient law is a convenient plot device to encourage the lovers to leave the city and enter the natural world, he also serves to remind us how restrictive different societies can be when it comes to love and relationships, and how choice in a marriage partner is still not a universally accepted custom, even in today's contemporary societies.

Discussion Questions

- 1. As a father, do you think that Egeus has the right to tell his daughter Hermia who to marry? Are father and daughter relationships any different today? What about father and son relationships?**
Students might like to discuss their own relationship with their parents and what that relationship is like with regards to power.
- 2. What customs do Australians follow when it comes to love and marriage?**
Students should discuss courtship rituals of every cultures that they are aware of.
- 3. What are the similarities/differences between Egeus and Capulet as fathers?**
Students who have previously studied Romeo and Juliet will find this topic interesting.
- 4. What types of law exist in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?**
Discuss this question in relation to the court of Theseus and the fairy realm of the forest.

Suggested Activities

ACTIVITY 1 - EGEUS' COMPLAINT

1. Each student writes down one thing that they remember about the scene, then two things and so on – who can remember the most? Feedback to a partner and then to the whole class. Recap as a group exactly what is happening in the scene

and then split into character groups to read the scene again. Egeus / Theseus / Hermia / Lysander / Demetrius.

2. Once students have read the scene they brainstorm all the things they know about the person on a large sheet of paper. This should include: the status of the person, how they are feeling, what they want, and different quotes that prove what they are like. Then pick one quote that sums up the type of person their character is.
3. Write Egeus' complaint as a contemporary scene, putting it into your own words and perform it for the class. Students might like to compare this situation to an episode of Jerry Springer, where those who have been wronged or betrayed by a loved one have the chance to air their grievances publicly.

ACTIVITY 2 – HERMIA'S DIARY

Write a diary extract for Hermia which takes into account all the actions of the day. What happened before she got to the court – how did her dad find out? What happened at court – how did she feel? What will happen next – will she tell anyone?

Lesson Three

MYTHS AND FAIRYTALES IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

Not for thy fairy kingdom
Act 2, Scene 1

Myths And Fairytales

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, mythological characters and creatures are used by Shakespeare to describe certain universal experiences that we cannot satisfactorily explain or control. In creating his mythological landscape, he happily plucks characters from Greek, French, German, Celtic and Rustic tales in an anachronistic frenzy that allows him to reinforce the symbolic Nature of his story. Relatively speaking, a myth is a proposition made about the human experience and its truth is tested through experimentation and the questioning of that experience. It is not a matter of believing that the myth actually occurred, rather it is a question of whether or not the myth adequately describes the certain experiences that we have as human beings (W.H. Auden, 2000, p54-55).

Fairy tales, just as they are prescribed in Shakespeare's play, are mythological tales, which contain something fey or extraordinary, the magical or the marvellous. Fairy tales, much like myths and legends, are derived from primitive man's experience with Nature, when he could not distinguish between Nature and his own personality, and when there was no such thing as the supernatural because he believed everything was endowed with a personal life.

Fairies

Nowadays when we think of fairies, we think of tiny little creatures with butterfly wings, suitable for children's tales rather than horrifying deeds. Tinkerbell is a good example. This is a strictly modern, watered down version of the Celtic faeries and one that owes its reputation to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare was the principal means of effecting the image revolution of fairies from 'little folk' ie the size of dwarves to thimble sized creatures who hide in acorns out of fear and sleep in the skin of snakes.

In earlier centuries before the play, fairies were taken much more seriously, having originated from the pagan sprites of the woodlands: the fauns, the satyrs, the nymphs of Greco-Roman mythology, together with the gnomes, elves and kobolds of Teutonic imaginings and the sorcerers and 'little folk' of Celtic tales (Asimov, 1970, p26). They were the mysterious forces of Nature, usually capricious and often malevolent, but they were also the imaginary figures of fun, created to personify Nature as Shakespeare has done in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In the play, Shakespeare has created a genuine mythological fairy kingdom replete with fairy trains and moonlight revels. All those who enter it emerge in some way transformed and enlightened. One fairy myth that is still believed by some today, is that if you step inside a ring of mushrooms, a fairy ring, you will be immediately transported into another realm, and be unable to return to the mortal world. One almost imagines that this is what happens to the Lovers as they unwittingly stumble

around the fairy's territory in the enchanted forest.

Oberon, King of the Fairies, directs the transformations in the play; he is the chief arbiter in his magical forest particularly in matters of love, but Puck is the chief actor and one who doesn't mind taking a bit of creative licence. The little Indian boy that Oberon and Titania, Queen of the Fairies argue over, is actually a changeling child, a mythological creature derived from a human baby.

The Changeling

In Shakespeare's *Henry 4, Part 1*, the King relates a folk legend of how some night-tripping fairy light have stolen their babies and left a fairy child or someone else's child in its stead – a changeling. One of the more fear-provoking legends concerning fairies was their habit for stealing healthy human infants from their cradles and substituting either sickly or deformed ones or fairy children in their place. The true horror of this legend was not so much in the needless fear that it provoked in parents but the fact that when a deformed, retarded or sickly child was born, the parents thought of it as a changeling and mistreated it in order that the fairies might take the child away (Asimov, 1970, p28).

In this case, Shakespeare mistakenly refers to the stolen normal child as the changeling, rather than the child who was left behind in its place. The changeling in this story represents the metamorphosis of human back to Nature, an infant who has been transformed into an immortal and who will live out his life as a child of Nature rather than grow old and die in the human world.

Considering the marital and parental overtures of the play, the fairy couple of Titania and Oberon appear to be arguing over the child's relationship with the 'mother', a relationship that has cut the 'father' off and excluded him from any affection or attention. Oberon is naturally jealous of the child's power to affect his wife and Queen, and would rather have the boy as part of his train so that he can be the dominant male of the tribe and reclaim his position in Titania's bed. This seems to reflect common experiences cited by both male and female adults, who state the difficulties that arise between partners when a new child is introduced to the established intimacy of the newly wed marriage bed. Perhaps this was Shakespeare's hidden message to newly-wed couples; that they must love their partners and children with equal respect.

The Legends Of Oberon, Titania And Puck

As far as we know, Shakespeare was the first ever to use the name of Titania for the Fairy Queen. Before that she was known as Queen Mab or Mab, which Shakespeare himself refers to in *Romeo And Juliet*. We could surmise like many others have, that Shakespeare derived this name from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid uses the name Titania in reference to the Moon. This is after all a moon-drenched play, a tale of fantastic goings-on in the dim-lit night. It makes sense that the Fairy Queen is also a moon goddess.

The name Oberon is not a creation of Shakespeare's. His name is derived from Alberich, the king of the dwarves in Teutonic legend. Alberich is softened into the French "Oberon", and in his title role as King of the Fairies, he plays a part in the medieval French romance called *Huon of Bordeaux*.

Puck, a king of the elves in Scottish mythology, was pictured as an evil demon to begin with. His role diminished with time to that of a mere mischief maker and it is this role that Shakespeare gives him. Puck proudly admits his identity and describes himself as Oberon's jester, making the rather dour Fairy King laugh at the practical jokes that he, the proudly tricky sprite, plays on people (Asimov, 1970, p26-29).

Considering what he does to the poor unsuspecting Bottom, it seems ironic that Puck was sometimes pictured as a frightening creature with an ass' head. As a shape-shifter he takes the form of animals such as a horse, an eagle or an ass. Puck used his shape-shifting to make mischief and he would often mislead travelers. Robin Goodfellow, his alter ego, was also famous for the same things, but he was also a helpful domestic sprite who would clean houses in exchange for milk or cream.

Oberon, Titania And The Fairy World

By Neville Harrison

All is not well in the fairy world. The strife over the changeling has disturbed both the fairy world and the natural world. Often overlooked in discussion and performance is this changeling and his significance as a source of discord. Oberon is jealous for, although Titania's motive in adopting the boy is admirable, *she now makes him all her joy*. Clearly she now neglects Oberon, at least in his opinion, and the important alliance between husband and wife is broken. When husband and wife are also ruler and consort, the disruption has widespread repercussions.

So Oberon's motives in gaining the boy; he states only that he wants him for *henchman*; are firstly to allay his own jealousy but, by now, also to restore order in his kingdom. He wins but how he does so is not entirely clear, although we know that he achieves his goal whilst Titania is under the spell of the love potion. Perhaps Titania's fixation on Bottom causes her to lose her fixation on the boy, leaving him vulnerable to Oberon's stealing of him. A very early American film made much of this, showing the boy constantly at Titania's side, being utterly pampered by her, until when she becomes enamoured of Bottom and forgets the boy entirely and he is snatched by Oberon.

Could it be though that male domination, a mere struggle for power of man over woman, of king over queen, explains the situation? Must Oberon have the boy to assert his position?

Oberon\Titania And Theseus\Hippolyta

There has been past involvement between these four. Oberon has been the lover of Hippolyta, Titania the lover of Theseus. Oberon has had other liaisons, *amorous Phillida* for one, and Titania has led Theseus on to several amatory adventures. We learn of these liaisons from the fairy king and queen, they are not mentioned by Theseus and Hippolyta. Perhaps they are beyond memory for the mortals, perhaps their encounters with the fairy world are now only a "dream"; just as the encounters which the four young lovers have had will not be part of waking consciousness.

The opening lines of Act 5 could be significant here where Hippolyta expresses somewhat more of an understanding of the lovers' experiences than Theseus does. It remains an intriguing question though, that just as interference by the fairy world, albeit almost inadvertently, affects the young lovers, might it also have played a part in bringing about the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, and that Hippolyta carries more of a subconscious memory of her liaison with Oberon than Theseus does of his with Titania.

Oberon, The Lovers' Mentor

As has been stated, Oberon's interference with the lovers' situation is almost accidental. He was sending Puck for the love potion because he needed it to solve his own problem and only by chance did he come across Demetrius and Helena. However, his intentions were benevolent and having discovered that mistaken identity had only made matters worse, he took it upon himself the task of sorting out the situation. His persistence and eventual correct anointing of eyes brought about true love-sight for the lovers and restored his own and Titania's love.

Nevertheless, one has the distinct impression that the activities of the fairy world as they influence the human, seem largely to be at the whim of error and coincidence – much like we refer to in Nature. Puck himself acknowledges this, for when his mistake is pointed out to him, he takes refuge in the concept that “*fate oer-rules*” intentions.

Titania, upon awakening, dances with her husband, Oberon speaks of his own love for her and expresses his benevolent wishes for the three other couples:

Oberon **Now thou and I are new in amity,
And will tomorrow midnight, solemnly,
Dance in Duke Theseus' house triumphantly,
And bless it to all fair prosperity.
There shall the pairs of faithful lovers be
Wedded, with Theseus, all in jollity.**

Act 4, Scene 1

Puck And The Fairies

Here we have the servants of the fairy King and Queen. Puck's services seem to be for Oberon's exclusive use whilst the others are at the beck and call of Titania. Puck, whilst mischievous, can not be seen as dangerously malicious. He delights in the humour of a practical joke, which no doubt brings discomfort, but no permanent harm is done. He warns Oberon of the approach of dawn, at which time *'damned spirits troop home to churchyards'*, being unable to bear the light of day. Oberon responds with, *'But we are spirits of another sor'*. So Puck is under the benign, although not necessarily efficient, control of Oberon.

Like his master, he too becomes very much involved with the lovers. He too desires that all will be well with them, but he also has the role of observer in that he can detach himself sufficiently to amuse himself at their difficulties and comment on their silly behaviour. *'Lord, what fools these mortals be!* (Act 3, Scene 2, 115) Whilst Oberon is the master, the servant Puck is not constrained from acting independently. He alone, almost casually and certainly with expectation of enjoyment at the discomfort it would eventually cause, thought up the ass-head transformation of Bottom.

So there is something of a dark side to Puck which leaves the way open for a director to ask questions about him. How benevolent is he? Without constraints imposed by Oberon, how would he behave? To what extent can the dark side of his mischievous, practical joking nature be exploited? It would be worthwhile having the students discuss how they experienced Puck in this performance.

Much the same questions could be asked of Titania's servant fairies. In their encounters with Bottom, are they truly caring of him or do they treat him as a butt of humour?

Titania And Bottom

What happens when Titania falls in love with Bottom? She ‘dotes’ on him; there is no doubt that she is completely besotted. Awakened by his raucous singing she asks, ‘*What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?*’ (Act 3, Scene 1, 124) and instructs her servants to utterly pamper him and bring him to her ‘*bower*’.

What takes place in the bower? Again, the situation leaves a great deal of interpretive option to the director. The 1935 American film version interspersed some sort of wedding ceremony before Bottom entered the bower, no doubt to allay sensitivities of censors and, possibly, audiences of the time. A recent Royal Shakespeare Company production had Titania and Bottom hoisted on high in a gigantic, upturned umbrella with Titania’s bare feet and Bottom’s gumboots protruding, intertwining and leaving little doubt as to the activity within.

On the other hand, Harold Bloom, himself not unaware or disapproving of presenting the bawdier aspects of Shakespeare where appropriate, sees little evidence of any sexual liaison for he sees Titania more interested in sitting ‘*the amiable Bottom down upon a flowery bed*’ where she ‘*caresses his cheeks, sticks musk-roses in his head and kisses his ears. This scarcely arouses Bottom to lust*’. He makes the point, too, that Bottom seems less amorously inclined than Titania and is more interested in making friends with Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to set his play in the world of the Fairies?
2. Besides the Fairies, Shakespeare uses the two Greek legends of Theseus and Hippolyta as characters in his play. Why do you think Shakespeare uses warriors from Greek mythology as an example of true and lasting love in marriage?
3. Besides the idea of Love, how do the Fairies represent the different forces that we refer to in Nature?
4. What is the relevance of Puck in this story? Considering his reputation, why do you think that Shakespeare made him the messenger?
5. Why do you think it is necessary for Oberon to make a fool of Titania and why do you think Puck chooses Bottom as his victim?

Suggested Activities

ACTIVITY 1 - OBERON’S REVENGE

Oberon wants revenge because Titania won’t give him the Indian boy. He nominates Puck to help carry out his plan. But why pick Puck? Read the conversation between the Fairy and Puck where they discuss Puck’s wicked ways. (Act 2, Scene 1, 32 – 58). List all of Puck’s characteristics and the pranks that he has played on unsuspecting humans. Imagine that you are Oberon and you need to advertise for someone to do Puck’s job. Write a job advert and then write Puck’s reply.

ACTIVITY 2 – FAIRY WORLD

Fairies are tiny creatures with butterfly wings, or are they? How would you describe a fairy? Write down a short description, draw a picture or make a collage of images using magazines. How do you picture their hair, their faces, the colour of their skin,

what they wear, how they move, how they speak? Give your fairy a name based on what you find in Nature and display your fairies in the classroom. Better still, have a day where you come dressed as your fairy, read fairy tales and eat fairy food – fairy bread and fairy cakes of course! – and decorate your classroom to look like a fairy kingdom.

Lesson Four

SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE MECHANICALS BY PETA DOWNES

And we will hear it
Act 4, Scene 2

It is interesting that alongside Greek warriors, star crossed lovers and malevolent fairies, Shakespeare chooses a group of actors to be their counterparts in this play about love. Interesting, but not really unusual considering that Shakespeare himself was an actor and spent most of his time in the company of these transformative creatures.

From 1594 until his retirement in 1613, Shakespeare worked, as an actor and playwright, with the company that he part-owned; in 1599 he also became a shareholder in that company's open-air suburban amphitheatre, the Globe; and in 1608, he became a shareholder in their indoor theatre at Blackfriars. As a playwright Shakespeare was emotionally and financially invested in the success of that company, and his plays are not only a testament to his innovation as a writer, but also reflect the respect that he had for the acting skills and prowess of his fellow players.

It is in Act 1, Scene 2 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that we first meet the motley crew of actors who have come together to rehearse a play intended for great Theseus nuptial day. The group has been traditionally referred to as the popular or rude 'mechanicals' – a title that Puck gives them due to their daytime occupations as a weaver, a bellows-mender, a tinker, a tailor, a carpenter and a joiner. Whether the Mechanicals are a group of amateur actors being enthusiastically led by a completely inexperienced director, Peter Quince or an acting troupe striving to be taken seriously is anyone's guess. The only one who seems to know what he is doing is Nick Bottom, who is considered to be something of an actor by the rest of his fellows and who considers the parts of tyrants to be best for his skills. When Peter Quince casts the troupe in the play and hands out the parts for Pyramus and Thisbe, he is following an acting tradition that would have been practised by Shakespeare's troupe.

As soon as Shakespeare had completed a full draft of the script, copies of individual parts would have been made for the actors to read and memorise. Unlike today, where a professional actor will receive a copy of the whole play, each actor received only the text of his own speeches, and the cues for them. Presumably the longest parts were copied first, so that the actors with the most to memorise could begin the soonest.

Shakespeare's plays were always written for a specific company of actors, and like every other professional playwright, his scripts were designed to suit the size and shape of his acting company. In creating the characters to tell his stories, Shakespeare would have been mindful of each individual actor's physical appearance and necessary skills; those with great virtuosity as performers were more likely to garner the great dramatic roles or comical parts.

In plotting and writing all his plays, Shakespeare would have assumed that some actors would play more than one role. Some of Shakespeare's plays have as many as fifty roles while at times, his company may have had as few as eleven actors. The tradition of character-doubling in Shakespeare's time was widespread and readily accepted by the audience as an opportunity for a great actor to be convincing in more than one part. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom, having already been given the role of Pyramus, suggests 'let me play Thisbe *too*', and 'Let me play the lion *too*' (Act 1 Scene 2); this is a reflection on Bottom's opinion of his own skill in transforming from one character to another in order to astound the audience. Actors playing the lead parts in a play did not (normally) double, and those playing young female characters did not (normally) play adult male characters too; most of the doubling (normally) involved adult male or female secondary characters, with relatively few lines.

Early documents from the professional theatres seem to allow at least one intervening scene for such changes, but in practice experienced actors have always been able to switch very quickly, and both actors and audiences sometimes enjoy such feats of virtuosity. Indeed, as Bottom's enthusiasm for engrossing extra roles suggests, actors sometimes enjoy playing more than one character, precisely because doing so permits them to display their shape-changing virtuosity.

There were no actresses in Shakespeare's company; instead, female roles were played by boys, young males a few years either side of puberty. Those same talented youngsters also played the many young boy characters who appear in early modern plays. Like modern choirboys, the performing boys of early modern England were often trained to sing. In casting the amateur performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, Flute is assigned to play the woman's part, presumably because he is so young he does not yet have a beard (Act 1 Scene 2). Flute's name identifies the central resemblance between women and boys: 'fluting', high-pitched voices.

Shakespeare wrote for stages where racial and ethnic differences were mimicked by Anglo-Saxon actors for Anglo-Saxon audience. Identities constituted by race or gender were, for Shakespeare and his acting company, prosthetic. The area directly behind the stage, where actors prepared for their entrances, was called the 'tiring-house', a place for putting on and taking off attire. One character is distinguished from another not by the differences between one actor's body and another actor's body, but by the difference between one outfit and another; one actor could have served for (many characters) but one costume could not.

The relationship between acting troupes and the nobility is well documented and patronage was a normal part of proceedings. Commissions were given in much the same way they are today for writers to create a work around a specific topic or theme. Despite court patronage, companies relied primarily upon the public performances for income. Most companies were organised on a sharing plan, and an actor had to put up a sizeable amount of money to become a shareholder. The shareholder formed a self-governing, democratic body that selected and produced plays; each shareholder was also responsible for another area of the company, such as writing, costume, acting.

Discussion Questions

1. **Considering the way that acting troupes functioned in Shakespeare's day, how close to the real thing are the Mechanicals?** Do you think that Shakespeare was sending up himself and his own acting troupe? If so, support your argument with reference to the rehearsal scenes in the play.
2. **What made a good actor in Shakespeare's day?** What qualities does Nick Bottom think that he possesses to make him a great actor?
3. **How experienced at the process of rehearsing and performing a play is Peter Quince?** Do you think Bottom is being arrogant or simply helping Quince out with his ideas about the play? Talk about their relationship in terms of a modern director and actor.

SHAKESPEARE'S CLOWNS OR SOCIAL CRITICS

A crew of patches, rude mechanicals □
That work for bread upon Athenian stalls, □
Were met together to rehearse a play □
Intended for great Theseus' nuptial day.
Act 3, Scene 2

Clowns Or Fools

In Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, clowns, jesters, fools and buffoons serve to highlight or hinder the actions of the characters who take themselves too seriously and those that do not realise the folly of their actions until it is too late. During the reign of Elizabeth I, clowning in England was a basic theatrical art form and we suppose that many actors had studied the antics of the *Commedia dell'Arte's zanni* or clowns, even though *Commedia* troupes rarely visited England. One such actor was William Kempe, a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who was noted for his low comedy and dancing abilities.

Recognised as the first clown to appear with this troupe, Kempe specialised in playing the country bumpkin-type characters. As the style of Shakespeare's clowns changed with the exit of Kempe and the addition of Robert Armin, it is clear that Shakespeare's writing was influenced by the talent of this comic actor. He was a wit who specialised in playing court jester style fools. His nobility and finesse allowed Shakespeare to abandon the foppish and ignorant bumbling clowns and create more subtle and philosophical comic characters and sophisticated jesters. These characters became known as Shakespeare's Fool, appearing in both comedy and tragedy as the witty and philosophical medium for the action of the play and the thoughts of its main characters.

Shakespeare's Fools effectively serve many purposes within the dramatic action: they are the perfect foil for the ignorant, introducing humour to both dramatic and comedic situations; they provide witticisms that provoke and prevent action, even though they have no real physical power in the court; they are fools to all, but servants to no one but themselves, holding a safe distance that allows them to see what others may not. By exposing this duplicity, they allow the audience a deeper insight into the story and its characters, and underline the play's key themes. They are the servant of two masters, they play and the audience, stepping in and out of the action to maintain the balance between them both.

It is suggested by some biographers of Shakespeare that Kempe succeeded in exasperating Shakespeare with his tendency to ad lib and improvise during performances of Shakespeare's plays. Although some scholars believe that parts of the existing scripts written by Shakespeare were ad libs written down verbatim when they proved popular with audiences. In an effort to keep Kempe away from undermining his more serious dramatic roles, Shakespeare created a series of 'simple' clowns and 'fumbling countrymen' to suit Kempe's stage persona. His most famous portrayal was as Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare apparently created this character with the intent of maligning the scene-stealing actor, but Kempe relished the over-the-top spirit of the character and played him to much acclaim.

Sweet Bully Bottom

by Neville Harrison

Bottom is an unforgettable creation, an egomaniac in some ways and yet an admirable one; a *'laughing-stock'* but one at whom we laugh with affection; a rustic, the *'shallowest thickskin'* as Puck describes him but one in whom we perceive the simple dignity and resourcefulness of the ordinary person. "When my cue comes, I will answer it", might very be his motto. He will be ready when called upon and we can admire his sense of responsibility and reliability. His problem is, and for this we enjoy him, that he answers cues which are not his and that he can be relied on to enliven a situation through ignorance.

The comedy of Bottom derives largely from his well-intentioned incompetence. He is a simple weaver, and no doubt a good one, but he is not an actor nor a queen's consort, roles into which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thrusts him. Yet, with all his incompetence and his childlike trust in his own abilities, he somehow succeeds. His acting as Pyramus does entertain his audience, he seems to befriend the elves who serve him in Titania's court and he behaves impeccably there as a gentleman donkey should. He is full of self-confidence. The language he uses shows this humorously with his malapropisms and his over-ambitious vocabulary. His desire to play all the parts in *Pyramus And Thisbe* might derive from this over-confidence, perhaps even from an inflated sense of importance. Yet, on the other hand, it might come from a childlike desire that nothing shall go wrong and that he believes himself capable of making it right.

Is it a selfish 'pushiness' that motivates Bottom or a desire that the production will be a success? However we might answer that question, there is a vanity in Bottom which precludes the wholehearted admiration of his colleagues who, by and large, look up to him. To Flute he is *'sweet bully Bottom'* but Peter Quince, knows him and can use his vanity to advantage. As Harold Brooks puts it, 'It is by buttering his vanity that Quince manages to keep him to the part of Pyramus; but it is the best butter'.

Bottom shows his resourcefulness in the rehearsal scene. Production problems arise and are the group generally refers to Bottom for the solution. Even when not directly referred to, he comes up with an idea, which is accepted. He suggests a prologue to allay the ladies' fear of bloodshed, the lion player being named so as not to terrify the audience, that the calendar be consulted about the moon's availability and he has a very practical solution for a wall. He has the ability to see through difficulty, nothing stops him, and whilst he is undoubtedly the clown, there is a certain innate wisdom in this clown.

Bottom is unfazed by any situation in which he finds himself. His imperturbability and self-confidence help him through any difficulty, indeed almost preclude him from noticing the difficulty. Unlike his protagonist, Puck, who is conscious of every joke and even orchestrates some, Bottom is blissfully unaware and his success comes about through his innocence and ignorance, allied to his trust in himself as a person. We have to give the points to Puck for cleverness but we do not admire him as we do Bottom. Bottom enjoys the company of his fellows, Titania and her fairy servants and he even sets Duke Theseus to rights (or so he thinks) without regard for protocol but also without giving offence. His imperturbability does not come about through awareness of a situation but from an invincible ignorance coupled with a gift of

rapport with others.

But Bottom has a dream. He awakens from enchantment and believes that he will not always be as he is. Images have passed before him which he takes to be of great import and he senses that, whilst for now they are beyond his comprehension, one day they will have deep meaning for him. What a wonderful way of expressing the contrast of his present childlike state with what he will become is Bottom's speech:

Bottom ...I have had a most rare vision. 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. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was – and methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.

Act 4, Scene 1, 203-12

Bottom will one day grow up. However, he doesn't have time to dwell on this any longer. There is a play to perform and he must get on with it.

In some ways it can be argued that Bottom is the absolute centre of the play, its innocent and unwitting central figure. He is the only mortal who converses directly with the fairies, he is the means by which Oberon and Titania re-establish their love, in course of which the young lovers are set to rights. He is the centre of attention in the final act, much of which is given over to a play within a play, both of which are concerned with parental influence on marriage.

Finally, it might be worth noting the significance of his name and trade; Bottom is a weaver and it is the weaving of plots which resolves the conflicts: "bottom" has a meaning as the central skein on which a weaver's wool is wound; "bottom" has the meaning of "deep" or "profound", yet also, of course, that often amusingly regarded portion of the human anatomy.

The Mechanicals And Their Play

Whilst the individual characters of The Mechanicals acting troupe, other than Bottom, are not seriously developed, we are in no doubt that the artisans are individuals. Here is a picture of the English working class, simple folk, quickly and affectionately sketched. In presenting their play they exhibit a generosity of motive, a whole-heartedness of endeavour, yet an utter incompetence of performance. Their efforts and intents are appreciated by the stage audience and are a source of hilarity to the theatre audience.

The comedy of the play within a play derives from people, competent in their own field but inhabiting another in which they are completely at a loss. Not only do they have little skill in presenting a play, but they live in their own "real world" and the world of imaginative fancy into which their play takes them is foreign to them. That is not to say that they lack imagination, rather that imaginative fancy and reality merge or interweave for them. This is a paradox, exemplified by their fear that their lion will be real enough to frighten ladies whereas it will be hilariously unrealistic.

PYRAMUS AND THISBE, A TRAGICAL COMEDY

The story of *Pyramus And Thisbe* suggests what might have eventually happened to the lovers in the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It also pokes fun at the frivolity of the whole business of falling in love. It is interesting to note that the tragic end of the *Pyramus And Thisbe* play reflects somewhat on what has been averted for the young lovers. Here, ludicrously, is a picture of the effects that parental interference has on romance.

Pyramus And Thisbe is not unmeaningly chosen as the burlesque, the grotesque play within the play, that is performed for the Duke Theseus and his bride Hippolyta, who are accompanied by the newly wed lovers at their wedding feast. The Mechanicals' play holds a mirror up to what the lovers, particularly Hermia and Lysander, have endured, and it closes the play proper with an amusing and somewhat poignant parody of their original romantic ideas of elopement. It seems unfortunate that *Pyramus And Thisbe* is often so hilariously presented that the significance of its subject matter is overlooked. It is noteworthy too, that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows closely in the Shakespeare canon upon *Romeo And Juliet*, where parental interference, or attempts to evade it, lead to tragedy.

Did Shakespeare's satirical treatment of Pyramus and Thisbe get him interested in writing a serious version of the tale or was *Romeo And Juliet* already written and he was poking good-natured fun at it? Either seems possible, as there are many elements which seem to mimic the other and even language that shares a similar phrasing; for example Juliet's speech and Thisbe's speech just before they stab themselves.

Juliet	Then I'll be brief. O, happy dagger. This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die.
Thisbe	Tongue, not a word: Come, trusty sword, Come, blade, my breast imbrue!

THE TRAGIC TALE OF PYRAMUS AND THISBE

Pyramus was the handsomest youth, and Thisbe the fairest maiden, in all Babylonia, where Semiramis reigned. Their parents occupied adjoining houses; and neighbourhood brought the young people together, and acquaintance ripened into love. They would gladly have married, but their parents forbade. One thing, however, they could not forbid that love should glow with equal ardor in the bosoms of both. They conversed by signs and glances, and the fire burned more intensely for being covered up.

In the wall that parted the two houses there was a crack, caused by some fault in the structure. No one had remarked it before, but the lovers discovered it. What will love not discover? It afforded a passage to the voice; and tender messages used to pass backward and forward through the gap. As they stood, Pyramus on this side, Thisbe on that, their breaths would mingle. 'Cruel wall', they said, 'why do you keep two lovers apart? But we will not be ungrateful. We owe you, we confess, the privilege of transmitting loving words to willing ears.' Such words they uttered on different sides of the wall; and when night came and they must say farewell, they pressed their lips upon the wall, she on her side, he on his, as they could come no nearer.

One morning, when Aurora had put out the stars, and the sun had melted the frost from the grass, they met at the accustomed spot. Then, after lamenting their hard fate, they agreed that next night, when all was still, they would slip away from watchful eyes, leave their dwellings and walk out into the fields; and to ensure a meeting, repair to a well-known edifice, standing without the city's bounds, called the tomb of Ninus, and that the one who came first should await the other at the foot of a certain tree. It was a white mulberry tree and stood near a cool spring. All was agreed on, and they waited impatiently for the sun to go down beneath the waters and night to rise up from them.

Then cautiously Thisbe stole forth, unobserved by the family, her head covered with a veil, made her way to the monument and sat down under the tree. As she sat alone in the dim light of the evening she descried a lioness, her jaws reeking with recent slaughter, approaching the fountain to slake her thirst. Thisbe fled at the sight, and sought refuge in the hollow of a rock. As she fled she dropped her veil. The lioness, after drinking at the spring, turned to retreat to the woods, and seeing the veil on the ground, tossed and rent it with her bloody mouth.

Pyramus, having been delayed, now approached the place of meeting. He saw in the sand the footsteps of the lion, and the color fled from his cheeks at the sight. Presently he found the veil all rent and bloody. 'Oh, hapless girl', said he, 'I have been the cause of thy death! Thou, more worthy of life than I, hast fallen the first victim. I will follow. I am the guilty cause, in tempting thee forth to a place of such peril, and not being myself on the spot to guard thee. Come forth, ye lions, from the rocks, and tear this guilty body with your teeth'. He took up the veil, carried it with him to the appointed tree, and covered it with kisses and with tears. 'My blood also shall stain your texture', said he, and drawing his sword plunged it into his heart. The blood spurted from the wound, and tinged the white mulberries of the tree all red; and sinking into the earth reached the roots, so that the red color mounted through the trunk to the fruit.

By this time, Thisbe, still trembling with fear, yet wishing not to disappoint her lover, stepped cautiously forth, looking anxiously for the youth, eager to tell him the danger she had escaped. When she came to the spot and saw the changed colour of the mulberries she doubted whether it was the same place. While she hesitated she saw the form of one struggling in the agonies of death. She started back, a shudder ran through her frame as a ripple on the face of the still water when a sudden breeze sweeps over it. But as soon as she recognised her lover, she screamed and beat her breast; embracing the lifeless body, pouring tears into its wounds, and imprinting kisses on the cold lips.

'Oh, Pyramus,' she cried, 'what has done this? Answer me, Pyramus; it is your own Thisbe that speaks. Hear me, dearest, and lift that drooping head!' At the name of Thisbe, Pyramus opened his eyes, then closed them again. She saw her veil stained with blood and the scabbard empty of its sword. 'Thy own hand has slain thee, and for my sake,' she said. 'I too can be brave for once, and my love is as strong as thine. I will follow thee in death, for I have been the cause; and death, which alone could part us, shall not prevent my joining thee. And ye, unhappy parents of us both, deny us not our united request. As love and death have joined us, let one tomb contain us. And thou, tree, retain the marks of slaughter. Let thy berries still serve for memorials of our blood.' So saying, she plunged the sword into her breast. Her parents acceded to her wish; the Gods also ratified it. The two bodies were buried in one sepulchre, and the tree ever after brought forth purple berries, as it does to this day.

Discussion Questions

1. **Some people say that Bottom is the most important character in the play. What do you think his function is in the dramatic action?**
2. **What is the point of The Mechanicals rehearsals?** How do these scenes inform the themes and other action of the play?
3. **Why is the performance of *Pyramus And Thisbe* important to the lovers and to Bottom?** Students might like to discuss how theatre can help to reflect upon personal ideas and action.
4. **Students who have also studied *Romeo And Juliet* might like to draw comparisons between that story and the legend of *Pyramus And Thisbe*, focusing on the relationship between the lovers and their parents.**

Suggested Activities

Activity 1 - The Mechanicals

Read Act 1, Scene 2 and profile the actors according to their behaviour and language. What type of people are these men – how do you know? What do you imagine they would be like physically and how would they appear under everyday circumstances? What sort of clothing do you imagine them wearing to rehearsal? Share your answers with the class.

Now read the performance scene and imagine what these characters have to do to their appearance to transform into the lovers, the lion, the wall and the moon for the play's performance. Try to think of household items or items related to their profession that they might use as part of their costume.

Activity 2 – Pyramus And Thisbe

In groups of six, read through Quince’s prologue in Act 5, Scene 1, 126-50. Cast yourself in one of the parts and create a dumb show together – that is, a mimed physical version of what is being said in the prologue as it is being read. Perform your dumb show for the class and try to see who can be the most ridiculous or the most truthful.

Lesson Five

SET DESIGN AND TRANSFORMATION IN BELL SHAKESPEARE'S *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

Written for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* programme by Alison Gooley

This man, with lantern, dog, and bush of thorn,/Presenteth Moonshine.
Act 5, Scene 1

Transformations thread through *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Day follows night follows day; characters wake, dream, wake again; and move between a socially constrained court life and a forest of limitless possibilities. Fraught individuals become couples, and a Bottom an ass. The audience itself travels through worlds, glimpsing the courtship of nobles, the meddling of fairies and the crude thespian preparations of "hard-handed men". In transforming the play from script to stage, director Anna Volska employs movement, set and costume design to further explore this notion of change.

Eight of the nine-person cast play multiple roles as fairies, lovers and mechanicals, all but Puck revolving through the three worlds in which the story unfolds. In addition, the set, deliberately unencumbered with literal representations, changes largely under the efforts of these actors, who portray forest, court and rehearsal space. Two actors might play a scene while seven others provide the forest in which they do so; then, as if in a dream, the forest can disappear, shifting and changing the scene with a fluidity impossible in a more conventional physical arrangement. Costume design supports this changeling caprice, depicting the characters growing organically out of their environment.

The physicality of actors was a key casting consideration in auditions, since the performers in this movement piece transform and define the space through their bodies. All actors had to be willing and able to play trees! Movement director Gavin Robins then designed specific training exercises, building the actors' physical repertoire to match the play's imaginative muscle.

Imagination and space are critical to the transformations Shakespeare's characters experience in the dreamy days before their marriages. Jennie Tate's (Designer) spare set thematically encapsulates these ideas and enables the production's movement: concentric circles of gauze fall to the stage like a wedding veil, or a slightly obscured vision, dreamlike and magical. The fairies weave their way between the two layers of gauze, as if through an obscure dream. The circle is an image of beauty and harmony as well as journeys and cycles, and of course, wedding rings.

Post Performance Discussion Questions

- 1. Name three different ways the production used the idea of transformation in the action, the set or the costumes.**
- 2. How did the actors differentiate the many characters they were playing?**
Give specific examples of at least two different actors.
- 3. What was the significance of the moon in this production and how did the action relate to it?** Did the absence of a rigid set work for or against the production in terms of time and place?

**AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNA VOLSKA, DIRECTOR,
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
BY PETA DOWNES**

'The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact' exclaims the Duke Theseus to his bride Hippolyta, dismissing the fairy tale adventures of the four lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as fantasy. His argument that lovers, like madmen and poets, suffer from overactive imaginations, is supported by Bell Shakespeare Associate Artist Anna Volska, who suggests that being in love is not necessarily always as romantic as one imagines and that a lover's perception can be both kind and cruel: "Being in love can sometimes be a very wearing, uncomfortable state. Your perception becomes heightened which can be very thrilling, but that can also become very dangerous, very knife's edge." Of course, knowing the effect that love might have on our imagination doesn't seem to stop us from falling head over heels, and Volska seems to believe that when it comes to love and marriage, the natural order of things takes over.

As the director of the 2004 Bell Shakespeare production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Volska is obviously delighted to be revisiting one of Shakespeare's best-loved plays and she offers very straightforward reasons for its popularity: "I think that it is so beloved because it is so apparently simple. The text is very easily understood. There are very few difficult words, and very few difficult ideas in it too, given that it's a treatise about love. So it's a grown-up play, but it is enchanting for people of all ages because it is also shimmering, magical and funny".

While love and imagination are important themes in the play, Volska believes that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also offers hope for the future of humankind and is inspired by the ideas of nature that exist in the play: "One of the major themes of the play is the preciousness of our future and the focus of the play aims towards the final scene, which is a blessing on procreation. Whether our future is defined in terms of nature and the environment, or whether it is to do with just our children, they are both equally precious. We know the only way children and baby animals can survive is if their nest is safe and protected, and one of the best ways to ensure that is through harmony in the parental relationship".

Volska notes that the five sets of lovers in the play all offer a different perspective on love through their various relationships. She sees the young couple Hermia and Lysander as embracing the rather romantic notion that *'the course of true love never runs smooth'*. They seem to revel in the threat that social law poses to their relationship, because it serves as proof that they truly are in love: "Hermia and Lysander seem to be acting out a kind of dramatic posturing of what true love should be like. They have their long list of how you have to suffer to be truly in love. Either because somebody else dictates who you should love or whatever other obstacles happens to get in your way. They seem to delight in the trouble that they have".

The other young couple, Helena and Demetrius present the idea of obsession and repulsion in love: "With Helena and Demetrius, you have one character deeply loving the other and the other literally running away from the relationship. One is obsessed while the other is desperate to free himself". Volska sees the already betrothed couple, Theseus and Hippolyta, as presenting the idea of opposites finding a way to live together in a type of yin and yang relationship, while the Bottom and Titania relationship shows a darkly sexual and more fantastic side to love.

The relationship at the heart of the play, Volska believes, is that between the fairy King and Queen, Oberon and Titania, and their fight for power. This is potent love at its most impotent, a stalemate between lovers of equal passion refusing to give in to the other's desires because of petty jealousy or stubbornness. "They claim to be fighting over a little Indian boy, but he is quickly forgotten. I think it really is about possession and power, and the world depends on the harmony of their relationship". So instead of the natural harmony that would normally exist in the fairy world there is discord and chaos, which results in the unnatural disorder of the human world.

By choosing the fairy world as the setting for this production rather than the Athenian court, Volska admits that the world of Oberon and Titania has become the focus, superseding that of Theseus and Hippolyta, which has traditionally been used to frame the play: "I have chosen to frame the play with the fairy world instead of the court, because the fairy world is Nature and with this production I'm interested in Nature rather than any kind of court and social order. The social order that is restored at the end of the play becomes the natural order of things - wedding, bedding and babies."

Whether it is by imagination or through reality, each couple in the play experiences a broad spectrum of emotional states and physical encounters with the other characters, which challenges their perceptions of each other and themselves. Even though being in love can make you imagine things, Volska suggests that it is only when you understand how to love someone else as part of an ongoing relationship that you see things for what they really are. Which is what happens to the four lovers when they awake after their night of adventures. "This is one of the key scenes in the play. After their experiences the lovers look at each other and say, 'Ah, now I can see clearly. The only way to love truly is to allow the other person to have their own life without wanting to change or control them.'" This of course leads the characters to an understanding of what being in a loving relationship really means, and the play's harmonious conclusion of matrimony becomes the next natural step for them to take.

**TRANSPOSING FORM WITH DIGNITY,
OR, HOW TO PLAY A TREE AND NOT LOOK SILLY
INTERVIEW WITH MOVEMENT DIRECTOR GAVIN ROBINS
BY JULIETTA JAMESON**

“There are ways to play a tree and then there are ways to play a tree,” says Gavin Robins. As movement director for Bell Shakespeare’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Robins has had good cause to think about the right way to play a tree. And the right way to play a tree, he says, is a far cry from your primary school interpretation. “You use fingers, toes, body angles and you look at the simplicity of it. You interpret the text. Matching the imaginative muscle with the physical muscle is the challenge for me, especially with this production.”

Setting the challenge is Bell Shakespeare’s Associate Artist Anna Volska, who is directing this production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Volska has created a show that is full of movement. “One of the things the play is about is transformation. We have nine actors in the cast and that dictates quite a lot of the style in that all of them are doubling roles, except Puck (Richard Gyoeff).”

“All the others will be fairies, lovers and also mechanicals. Through that, we will explore these notions of change.” That won’t be all the actors will be doing. And that’s where Robins job really kicks in. Utilising a very simple set by Jennie Tate, the actors will be required to create a sense of place.

“I didn’t want the set to be encumbered by literal things,” says Volska. “Actors will be portraying not just trees, but the court, Quince’s house and other scenes. The changes need to be fast; you don’t need to have to have actuality. Two actors may be playing out a scene, while seven other people can provide the forest in which they do so. Then the forest can disappear. It’s all about shifting and changing.”

Robins and Volska had early discussions about how actors would go from a chorus to principal roles to playing the chorus again, to creating this imaginary, transformative world for the play. From those discussions Robins says, some exercises and training formats were set, which in turn, set up the casting process. “We were looking at actors who had a sense of physicality. They needed to be all rounders in the sense of being great actors, but also dexterous with their bodies. It is more difficult to find an actor who is as strong in body as with voice and psychological, emotional muscle.”

Since first working with Bell Shakespeare in the 1999 production of *Henry 5*, Robins has overseen the development of a real commitment to physicality at Bell Shakespeare, including a strict yoga and fitness regime. “John has a commitment to creating an ensemble where there is an ongoing culture of training,” says Robins.

“Before each rehearsal period begins, we have a couple of days of physical exercises so the actors can get back into their bodies. That is reflected in the work and more and more. John’s work and Bell Shakespeare’s vision is one where there is a very distinct physicality.” Robins believes such a commitment is important to theatre, because contemporary audiences are so visually oriented. “Trying to match the muscularity of the language with a physicality is part of the responsibility of presentation,” he says. “I am really inspired by film and what’s happening in terms of

the risks actors and directors take in their range of expression. There is a lot to be learned in theatre from film and we can become bolder. We can exercise the audience's imagination and I know that is what Anna is looking to do with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to create a strong sense of ensemble where they can transform the space through their bodies."

Robins says this presents huge challenges for actors. Indeed, Volska says with a laugh, "One of the things I checked in the audition process was if everyone was going to be okay with playing everything; if they were happy about playing trees." It's a funny point, but a poignant one. "The huge challenge for the contemporary actor is to bridge the gap between imagination and the body," says Robins, "From not only imagining something, but actually being able to do it. There is fear involved: physical fear sure, but more the fear of looking silly."

"We start the process by looking at the scenes, generating an image and creating it physically. And what we find is that it bonds the group and they discover a language for the show and find unity and trust in each other. This takes away the fear."

Robins' big high profile job last year was as movement director for Channel Ten's smash hit, *Australian Idol*. Yes, it was Robins who taught runner-up Shannon Noll his little Elvis move, credited with getting him to the finish line in such close proximity to the winner. And says Robins, working with Noll was not so far away from working with the actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as one might think. "You've got to use what they can do, find what works for them," he says. "It's a process of editing, taking out the weak things, the repetitive choices, and leaving them with their strongest. It's like finding your limitations. Most of the actors aren't highly acrobatic or virtuosic. But they are capable of so much more than they at first realise. It's a great process of discovery."

Post Performance Discussion Questions

1. **How was the environment of the Forest suggested in this production?**
2. **How much consideration did the actors give to movement in this production? How was movement used?**
3. **Did the actors develop any definite shapes and gestures to define their characters. Did that help you to understand who they were or confuse you?**
4. **Compare the movement used for the Fairies to the Mechanicals. What was the difference?**
5. **How did the lighting and music suggest the themes of love and dreams?**
6. **Was the production what you imagined it would be? How was it different?**

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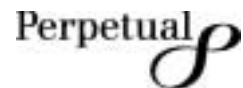
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