



[A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), by William Shakespeare

In A Nutshell

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy written by William Shakespeare around 1595. The play is about four sets of lovers: one fairy couple, the Duke of Athens and his bride, and four young Athenians. Part of the great fun of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that all of these characters are made into fools by love and fairy magic.

When Shakespeare wrote this play, Elizabeth I was still the Queen of England and Shakespeare was simultaneously working on *Romeo and Juliet*. The performance of the play *Pyramus and Thisby* within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could be seen as a lighthearted mock-up for *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a more serious treatment of a similar storyline. During Shakespeare's time it was assumed that the audience was acquainted with the story of *Pyramus and Thisby* as told by Ovid. Shakespeare, however, uses the classical tale of tragedy towards humorous ends in his comedy. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is light in many ways: the language is gorgeous and lush, and problems are sometimes treated frivolously.

The play's airy nature might be explained by the occasion for the play. Though the exact venue for which this play was written is unknown, it's generally thought to be a piece meant for performance at a nobleman's wedding. Just as the character Theseus dismisses plays about history and tragedy for his wedding night, Shakespeare seems to have deliberately written *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a lighter piece fit to be performed at a celebration. In general, this period at the end of the 1500s is thought to be when Shakespeare was at his best with the

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comedies, having perfected their form.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 The four young Athenian lovers in the play are pretty much interchangeable characters. Shakespeare seems to have deliberately avoided developing Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius as unique characters. Is this a commentary on the fact that love makes everyone a fool, and a person in love needs no other explanation?
- 2 Are Hermia and Helena treated as more foolish in the play than the males? Is this a commentary on gender? How do we interpret the fact that Hermia and Helena seem just as foolish as the guys, though they aren 't under an enchantment?
- 3 The fairy world, the courtly world, and the natural world are all very present in the play, but we 're never really sure of the relationship between them. Does Shakespeare hold one world above the others? Which, if any, is credited with being the closest to reality? Does Shakespeare actually argue within the play that there is no single objective version of reality (a theory otherwise known as solipsism)?

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