



**UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE**

**A Midsummer
Night's Dream**

Robert A. Albano

UNDERSTANDING

SHAKESPEARE:

A

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NIGHT'S

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MERCURY PRESS

Los Angeles

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A Midsummer Night's Dream

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

Introduction

A Midsummer Night's Dream is, perhaps, William Shakespeare's most charming and endearing dramatic work. Not only is it a marvelous **comedy**, but the play is also a wonderful **fantasy**. Shakespeare was never one to shy away from exploring and expanding upon the boundaries of his own **imagination**, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the playwright fashioned a new and original work that drew upon the mythology and fantasy of Western culture.

Although Shakespeare's play is often cited as being one of the first works in English literature to present a **fairy tale** fantasy, that is not entirely true. Fairy tale literature actually had been in existence for hundreds of years, and the origins of fairy tale literature actually can be found in ancient Greek and Roman mythology as well as in the myths and legends of other lands. The stock figure of the **wicked witch**, for example, which appears in numerous fairy tales collected and transcribed by the Grimm Brothers (circa 1815), has her roots in Greek mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey*, which dates back to approximately 800 BC, the hero **Odysseus** encounters a witch named **Circe**, who has the magical ability to transform people into animals. Mythological characters like Circe thus became the predecessors or prototypes for many of the typical or stock characters of later fairy tale literature.

One of the prominent characters appearing in this Shakespearean comedy is a fairy by the name of **Puck**, who is also called **Robin Goodfellow**. Puck is

not an original creation by Shakespeare. In fact, the creation and legend of Puck occurred in the Anglo-Saxon era in England (before 1066 AD). Even in those early times, the idea of a mischievous and troublesome sprite or fairy that would play pranks on people but that also might render them a useful service was a common character of literature in the oral tradition of England.

However, the earliest fairies of England were often considered to be dark or sinister supernatural figures that could bring deadly harm to humans. In fact, the words *fairy* and *demon* were practically interchangeable. Fairies in England have their roots in medieval Celtic myths. Such fairies were as large or larger as humans, not the tiny or diminutive creatures that appeared in the fairy tales of later times. And these fairies inhabited a forbidden underworld that was dangerous for humans. This Celtic underworld forms the setting for a later medieval story entitled *The Turk and Gawain*. In that tale the hero, Sir Gawain, enters the underworld to discover that a castle and the lord of that castle have been transformed into dark and sinister forms by a fairy. Sir Gawain breaks the spell of enchantment to free that lord. Such a tale, obviously, suggests an early version of the later fairy tale known as "**Beauty and the Beast.**"

During the Middle Ages the fairies might also be helpful to the race of humans. In another tale involving the knightly hero Sir Gawain, a fairy disguised as an ugly old hag helps to save King

Arthur from death. The story, which is entitled *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, ends with the fairy transforming herself into a beautiful wife for Gawain after he successfully passes her test.

Just about all of the characters that appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have appeared before in literature in one form or another. However, Shakespeare develops and refashions these characters in such a way that they vastly transcend the thin and two-dimensional treatment that they had previously been given.

Moreover, William Shakespeare takes these older characters and older stories and combines them in a manner that surprised and delighted the audiences of his day. Also contributing to such delight is that the playwright took five completely separate and unrelated tales and wove them together into a splendid fantasy tapestry. The five tales do not seem as if they belong together, but Shakespeare makes it work. Each of the five stories is integral to the whole play. If any one of the five stories is edited out of the play, the play itself would unravel and fall apart. There is nothing extraneous or digressive about any of the parts. All five together form one unified glorious whole dramatic work of literature.

The following five stories are interwoven together:

- (1) The primary story concerns **four young lovers**: Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius, and Helena. Due to plot twists and complications, three love triangles develop or evolve during the course of the story: (a) Hermia / Lysander / Demetrius, (b) Helena / Hermia / Demetrius, and (c) Lysander / Demetrius / Helena. Adding further complications among these lovers is a conflict that develops between Hermia and her father. Hermia wants to marry Lysander, but her father wants her to marry Demetrius.
- (2) There is also a subplot involving **the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta**.
- (3) And there is a conflict between **Oberon and Titania**, the King and Queen of the fairies.
- (4) And there is the conflict involving **the artisans** (or skilled workers) who attempt to produce a play to honor the coming wedding of Duke Theseus.
- (5) And finally there is the play within a play: *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Thus, Shakespeare mixes five diverse and completely various stories and puts them together into a harmonious whole: (1) Italian romantic comedy, (2) Greek mythology, (3) Celtic myth and fairy tale folklore, (4) broad English country humor, and (5) a Roman myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Yet, Shakespeare's play is strikingly original. The originality of play comes from the interweaving of such diverse elements. Not only has Shakespeare brought together a variety of sources; but he also has invented the lovers' plot, which is influenced by but not directly taken from Italian romantic comedy.

Oddly, the most interesting character in the play and the character that has attracted the most attention and notice over the centuries is not a protagonist in any of the five plots. The character of **Puck** (or Robin Goodfellow) is one of the most endearing and popular characters of English literature, and the role of Puck is a highly coveted one by Shakespearean actors around the world.

Puck also serves as a **structural device**. He is directly connected to the first, third, and fourth stories listed above. Puck not only adds humor and interest to the play, then, but he is also integral to the plot of the overall dramatic work.

As in all great dramatic comedies, Shakespeare varies the **tone** of this play. The tone varies from heavy to light. Heavy moments, such as Theseus' harsh judgment against Hermia or the disasters caused by the quarrel of the king and queen of the fairies, provide balance to the light and

cheerful moments, such as Hermia and Helena's battle or the pranks caused by Puck. The play is never dull, and the audience is entranced and thrilled as one glorious moment follows after another.

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