A Midsummer Night's Dream

William Shakespeare · *c. 1595 · original English text*

Four Athenian lovers flee into a wood, a fairy king and queen quarrel over a changeling child, and a company of craftsmen rehearse a play for a duke's wedding. Puck's flower makes the wrong eyes dote, and the night must be mended before morning. The comedy is light, and it is also about authority, consent, and the strange rule of the imagination.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When love is misled, and authority is proud, can a night of error be set right without cruelty?

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

Lysander · Act I, Scene I

Lysander is more right than he knows. The wood disorders love, but Oberon finally has the juice used to restore as well as to punish, Theseus overrules a father's death-sentence, and Puck asks the audience's hands. The play mends what it has tangled, and it does not pretend the tangle was nothing.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hermia
Stubborn in a just love, and nearly ruined by a charm meant for someone else

Lysander
Hermia's chosen husband, made fickle for a night by Puck's mistake

Helena
Faithful to Demetrius past pride; she sees that love is blind before the flower proves it

Demetrius
Egeus's choice for Hermia, later bound to Helena by Oberon's last use of the juice

Oberon
Fairy king, jealous, then finally a mender of the night he disordered

Titania
Fairy queen, who will not yield the child, and is made to dote on an ass

Puck (Robin Goodfellow)
Oberon's servant, swift, mischievous, and the play's last speaker

Nick Bottom
The weaver who would play every part, and who keeps a kind of sense even as an ass

Theseus
Duke of Athens, who at last chooses mercy toward the lovers

HANDS, IF WE BE FRIENDS

"The course of true love never did run smooth."
Lysander · Act I, Scene I

"If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have but slumber'd here / While these visions did appear."
Puck · Act V, Scene I

Grades 6–10
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01 The Athenian Law

ACT I

A father's will, a duke's wedding, and a hard choice offered to a daughter.

- Theseus is to wed Hippolyta; Egeus demands that Hermia marry Demetrius or face death or a convent
- Hermia loves Lysander; Helena loves Demetrius, who has left her
- Lysander and Hermia fly to the wood; Helena, unwisely, tells Demetrius
- Bottom and his company are given a play, "Pyramus and Thisbe," to rehearse for the wedding

> *"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; / And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind."*
> **Helena** · Act I, Scene I

02 Ill Met by Moonlight

ACT II

The fairy quarrel, and a flower that will make love dote.

- Oberon and Titania quarrel over a changeling boy; she will not yield him
- Oberon sends Puck for a flower whose juice, laid on sleeping eyelids, makes the next creature beloved
- He means to cheat Titania, and also to help Helena; Puck mistakes the Athenian men
- The juice falls on Lysander, who wakes and follows Helena, leaving Hermia

> *"Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania."*
> **Oberon** · Act II, Scene I

03 The Ass and the Queen

ACT III

A weaver is translated, and the lovers are wholly at odds.

- Puck sets an ass's head on Bottom; Titania, charmed, dotes on him
- Both men now pursue Helena; Hermia is abandoned and then accused
- Bottom, even translated, can see that reason and love keep little company together nowadays
- Oberon begins to correct Puck's error; the night is not yet over

> *"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"*
> **Puck** · Act III, Scene II

04 The Night Mended

ACT IV

The juice is used to restore, and the law is softened at dawn.

- Oberon takes the boy, releases Titania, and has Bottom's head removed
- The lovers are paired rightly and sleep; Theseus finds them in the morning
- Egeus still demands the law; Theseus overbears it and will have the two couples wed with him
- Bottom wakes with a rare vision he cannot quite tell, and hurries back to his play

05 The Wedding Play

ACT V

Imagination is named, a tragedy is played as farce, and Puck asks a blessing.

- Theseus, hearing the night's story, speaks of the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, of imagination all compact
- The craftsmen perform Pyramus and Thisbe, badly and dearly, before the three wedded pairs
- The fairies bless the house at the close
- Puck tells the audience that if the shadows have offended, they may take the play for a dream, and asks their hands

> *"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact:"*
> **Theseus** · Act V, Scene I

Love and Consent · Authority and Mercy · Imagination · Order Restored · Humility

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–10

1. Egeus would have his daughter die or be shut away. Theseus at first backs the father's right; at dawn he overbears it. Watch that change.
2. Oberon's treatment of Titania is a humiliation. The play ends in a blessing, but the quarrel over the child is not a joke to her.
3. Puck's error with the juice is the engine of the plot. The comedy depends on a mistake, and then on the will to mend it.
4. Bottom's line that reason and love keep little company is comic, and it is one of the play's truest remarks.
5. The craftsmen's Pyramus and Thisbe is a tragedy of lovers played as farce at a wedding. It is also a kind comment on how art can be clumsy and still given room.

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