



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2020 Study Guide



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Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing by William Blake.

ENGLAND AND THE FAIRY WORLD

The fairy world and the pagan sprites of the natural world were still a very real thing to most Elizabethan people of all ranks. Some of the things they believed were:

- Fairies were the same size as human beings and were often mistaken for regular people. Shakespeare may have been one of the first to imply that they were small beings.
- They were dangerous and were often blamed for accidents, deaths, natural disasters and bad weather. Because of this danger, humans would try to keep fairies content and give them whatever they desired.
- They did not have wings.
- Fairies had green eyes and were thought to be beautiful.
- They dressed in green because they were beings of the forest and nature.
- They loved cleanliness and would reward the neat and tidy and punish people who were messy.
- They depended on humans for meat, bath water, bread and drink. Their favorite food was milk or



A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare



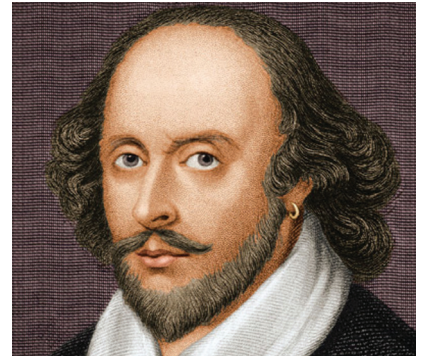
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Illustration for Puck of Pook's Hill by Arthur Rackham.

PUCK

One famous member of Shakespeare's fairy world is Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow or Hobgoblin. For Elizabethans he was not a fairy but a folk character. His qualities are:

- He is not dangerous but is a prankster known for pinching bottoms, tripping and practical jokes.
- He could lead travelers astray, tip dreamers out of their beds, cause you to have nightmares while carding your wool, twist up bedclothes and drink your beer.
- He carried a broom and would clean houses for folks who left him bread and cream. The broom also could be used to thresh grain, and if he liked you, he would thresh a month's grain in one night.



William Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE

- Born around April 23, 1564. Married Anne Hathaway. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603. Wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written in 1595 or early 1596.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research fairies in English folklore. How were fairies perceived in Shakespeare's day? What were the distinctions between "good" fairies and "bad" fairies? What is a changeling? These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changeling>

<http://mdsmrnytdrm.blogspot.com/2009/05/elizabethan-englands-fairies.html>

2. Research the traditional stories about Puck and Robin Goodfellow in English folklore. This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>

3. Research the mythological figure Cupid. In what ways is he similar to Puck? In what ways is he different? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.wisegeek.com/who-is-cupid.html>



2020 costume renderings for Oberon (left) and Titania (above) by Raquel Barreto.

4. In English folk tradition, what are the festivals of Midsummer, also known as Summer Solstice and May Day? When did they take place? What pagan rituals were associated with them? These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer>

<http://libcom.org/library/a-history-of-mayday>

5. Shakespeare often takes his characters out of the city and into the forest. What are the significant differences between these two settings? How might people behave differently in the city and in the forest? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-green-world.htm>

6. Research Theseus and Hippolyta in Greek mythology, and in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. These and other websites provide information:

www.britannica.com/topic/Theseus-Greek-hero

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyta>

www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/mssources.html

The course of true love never did run smooth.

—Hermia, Act I, scene 1

7. Research the inclement weather of 1594–1596 in Elizabethan England and read Titania's speech from Act II, scene i, lines 81–117. What are the similarities between the weather in 1594–96 and the weather that Titania describes? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/almanac/arc2011/alm11jun.htm>

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2909905?uid=3739856&uid=4579940077&uid=2&uid=3&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=21102131916507>

9. Shakespeare took the plot for the play-within-a-play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* from an earlier version of the story written by Ovid. Read the original story that Shakespeare used as his source material. These and other websites provide information:

http://www.online-mythology.com/pyramus_thisbe/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramus_and_Thisbe

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on the festivals of Midsummer's Eve and May Day. How are the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* influenced by these celebrations and their rituals?
2. Nature is one of the most important elements of the play. How is it incorporated in Shakespeare's language? What is the relationship of each character to nature? How does nature influence people's actions? Whose actions influence nature? How is nature incorporated into the scenic and costume designs?
3. Define the three parallel worlds of the play. How does Shakespeare use language to describe and define each? What are the similarities among the three worlds? The differences? Which characters are confined to a single world? Which characters move between worlds? How does the 2020 OSF production use scenery, costumes, lighting and sound/music to define each?
4. A traditional belief of the Elizabethans was "As above, so below." That is, events at a higher (social and/or spiritual) level filter through all the levels below it. What are the chaos and discord at the play's highest level (the supernatural kingdom of the fairies)? How is it expressed through the rest of the levels, including the natural world? How is harmony restored to all levels?
5. Refer to your research about Theseus and Hippolyta. What episode in their stories does the play incorporate? What qualities of the mythological Theseus does Shakespeare's Theseus embody? What Amazonian qualities are present in Shakespeare's Hippolyta? What are the conflicts between Theseus and Hippolyta? How are they resolved? How does casting the same actors as Theseus and Hippolyta and Oberon and Titania illuminate the play?
6. In what ways are the women in the play subject to the will of men. What does each want? Which man is thwarting her and how? What options are available to her? What is her status? How much power does she have? In each case, who is obliged to yield, and how is the yielding brought about?
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Above: 2020 costume rendering for Demetrius by Raquel Barreto.

Below: 2020 costume rendering for Helena by Raquel Barreto.



she have? In each case, who is obliged to yield, and how is the yielding brought about?

7. How does Shakespeare use the character of Puck to tie together the stories of Oberon and Titania, the lovers, and the mechanicals?
8. A major theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love and its power over people in love. What actions are the characters compelled to take because of love? Where are the characters in the beginning of the play in terms of love, how do they change as the action progresses, and where do they end up?
9. Lysander says, "The course of true love never did run smooth." Find examples in the play that support this statement. How does Shakespeare highlight the difficulties of love?
10. In the play, what is the relationship of love and friendship? When is friendship subordinated to love?
11. Compare the relationships of Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania, Helena and Demetrius, and Hermia and Lysander. What are their similarities? Their differences? What does Shakespeare reveal about the nature of love by comparing these relationships?
12. Find examples of contrasts and opposites: in characters, language, society, rank, stature, natural versus supernatural, nature versus civilization, love versus hate, etc. What does Shakespeare achieve by placing so much emphasis on antithesis?

13. What are the contrasting characteristics of Titania and Bottom? What does Shakespeare accomplish by pairing them romantically?

14. What verbal devices are used to create an atmosphere of magic? What technical effects created magic in the production? Why is magic important to the world of the play?

15. What is the significance of the play's title? Whose "dream" is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Find references to sleeping or dreaming in the text. What parts of the play have a dreamlike quality? Which characters have trouble distinguishing between imagination and reality? Why?

16. The word "moon" is used 28 times and the word "moonlight" 6 times in the text. Find the passages where these words occur. Why are references to the moon appropriate? What does the moon symbolize? How does Shakespeare use language to create an atmosphere of night and magic?

17. One of the most common occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is transformation. What are the instances of transformation in the play? Who and what are the agents of transformation? Which transformations progress from a good condition to a worse one? From lesser to greater? Which characters go through the entire play without changing? How does the symbolism of the moon support the theme of transformation?

18. Refer to your research about fairies. What is their relationship to darkness? What are their qualities and powers, according to Oberon? According to Puck? When are they frightening? When are they benign?

19. Oberon is called "King of Shadows." The actors are referred to as "shadows." How do the supernatural and the craft of acting seem to be related in the play?

20. Compare and contrast Hermia and Helena. Shakespeare gives them very different physical attributes, but how do they differ emotionally? What are their opinions of love and friendship? What effects do they have on those around them, and how does that change through the course of the play? Then compare Lysander and Demetrius in the same way.

21. Refer to your research about Shakespeare's source material for the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. What language devices does Shakespeare use to turn the tragic story into a comedy? What de-

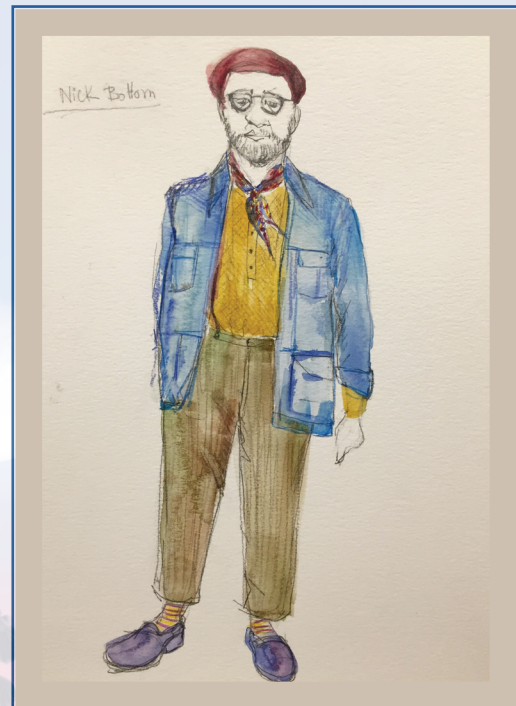
vices do the actors use to make it funny (even if not intentionally)?

22. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may have been first performed for a wedding. Why might it be a fitting offering for a wedding? In what ways is the play a celebration of love?

23. This production has transformed speeches and scenes into music. How does the addition of music reveal what is going on in the scene? The story? For the lovers? Puck? Thisbe?

24. If you are seeing *Peter and the Starcatcher* or *The Tempest*, compare the daughters in the plays with Hermia. How is each daughter valued and by whom? How much power does each daughter have? Which daughters find power by defying the societal expectations of their role as women? Which by conforming? How much choice does each have about whom she will marry?

25. If you are seeing *The Copper Children*, compare the control the children of both plays have over their lives. Who tries to control the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Who tries to control the orphans of *The Copper Children*? What are the consequences, good and bad, of adult interference in the lives of the children?



2020 costume rendering for Nick Bottom by
Raquel Barreto.

Background illustration by Michael Collin.

The Quarrel: What are Titania and Oberon fighting over?

The king and queen of the fairies appear in many classic European tales under many different names. The name Oberon shows up frequently, most prominently in the French 13th-century tale *Huon of Bordeaux*. The name Titania is used in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is the classical source Shakespeare used more than any other. As with Theseus and Hippolyta, Shakespeare may have taken the Oberon and Titania plot from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where in *The Merchant's Tale* the king and queen of the fairies are fighting, although about something entirely different.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania are found arguing over the future of a "changeling boy." In European folklore, fairies would steal human babies from their cradles and leave an imp, or imposter—a changeling in its place. In *Midsummer*, however, the "changeling boy" is an actual human child. His mother was a priestess of an order worshipping Titania, who speaks of her fondly as a close friend and confidante. When the mortal woman died in childbirth, Titania took the baby as her own responsibility. Oberon is jealous of the attention Titania is giving the boy and wants him to become a member of his entourage.



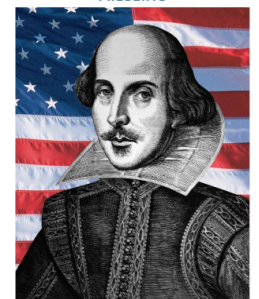
Left: 2020 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set rendering. Designed by Sibyl Wickersheimer

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