

## *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Comedy of Love*

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### INTRODUCTION

Having taught for over thirty years at an inner city high school, I have tried not only to shape my curriculum to my students' needs but also to make the study of British literature more relevant to my students' lives. I teach senior English, both the regular course and the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition course. My students are almost one hundred percent minority, primarily African-American. The teaching of Shakespeare has always been a challenge. One challenge is to show my students the relevance of a Shakespearean play to a high school student. The other hurdle is the language. To my students Shakespeare is hardly "modern English." His language is so different from what my students speak that I seem to be teaching a foreign language.

My students love to read and act out scenes in plays, so when we read, we sit in a semi-circle, I assign parts, and with a great deal of interpretation and explanation, we tackle a Shakespearean play, much like an unrehearsed reader's theater. Periodically I will show part of a film that depicts what we have just read. This approach has been fairly successful with the tragedies, but the few comedies I have tried have not seemed particularly amusing to my students. To most of my students, a comedy is something at which they can laugh out loud. They expect something that is slapstick and truly absurd. They do not understand that in Shakespeare's day, a comedy was merely a play that had a happy ending. Fortunately in plays like *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you can see both definitions—a play with a happy ending and a situation that is absurd and, at times, slapstick or farcical. What else could be said about Bottom's head being transformed into that of an ass, but that it is slapstick and absurd? This unit will focus on ways to engage my students in the study of Shakespearean comedy through the study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

My vision is to write a unit showing how the situations in Shakespeare's comedies can mirror life, values, and culture in the twenty-first century. I have made similar comparisons when teaching *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, but I haven't really looked much at the universality of the comedies. The overriding theme of the unit, therefore, will be the relevancy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to today's high school students. Another objective will be to help my students find the humor in the play, both in the lines and in the situation.

## OVERVIEW

### Summary of the Play

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins a few days before the wedding of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. Egeus, a nobleman, brings his daughter Hermia to Theseus. Hermia wants to wed Lysander, but Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius. Egeus invokes an ancient Athenian law that requires the daughter to wed according to her father's choice or die. The only other option for the daughter is to become a nun. Hermia refuses her father, but Theseus gives her a few days to decide. Lysander proposes that he and Hermia elope to his aunt's house on the other side of the wood, and they make plans to meet in the woods that night. In the meantime, Hermia confides in her friend, Helena, a girl in love with Demetrius. (Demetrius had previously been interested in Helena, but he dropped his interest upon meeting Hermia.) In hopes of gaining Demetrius' favor, Helena tells him of Hermia and Lysander's plans. Demetrius follows the lovers and Helena follows him.

In the woods, Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the Fairies, have had an argument over who should raise an orphaned Indian boy. Oberon instructs his henchman, Puck, to find a certain flower that has the power to create a love potion. While Puck is gone, Oberon sees Demetrius and Helena arguing. Demetrius spurns her and leaves. When Puck returns, Oberon instructs him to put the love potion on the eyes of the Athenian youth, meaning Demetrius, hoping the youth will then love Helena. Neither Puck nor Oberon realizes that there are four Athenian lovers in the woods. Oberon, in turn, places drops on the eyes of Titania. He hopes that she will awaken and love some foul creature and, while under the love potion's spell, give him the Indian boy. Meanwhile, Puck mistakenly places the love potion on the eyes of Lysander who awakens to see Helena and falls in love with her.

In another part of the woods, a group of artisans (mechanicals) are rehearsing a play they wish to perform after the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Puck watches their hysterical rehearsal and decides to literally make an ass of Bottom, the lead actor. Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass and has him be the first thing Titania sees when she awakens. After gaining the guardianship of the Indian boy, Oberon releases Titania from her spell, as Puck releases Bottom.

Once Oberon realizes that Puck has given the love potion to the wrong Athenian, he has Puck apply the love potion to Demetrius and arranges for him to awaken to see Helena first. Now both men swear love for Helena, and she believes they are playing a joke on her. When both men almost come to blows, Oberon steps in once more and has Puck separate them and then anoint Lysander again, but this time with an antidote. Thus, by the end of Act IV, the four lovers are appropriately paired—Lysander with Hermia and Demetrius with Helena.

Now that Demetrius no longer wishes to wed Hermia, Egeus reluctantly agrees to the marriage of his daughter to Lysander. The couples attend the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta and watch the ridiculous rendering of *Pyramus and Thisbe* by the mechanicals.

### **Pre-reading Strategies**

#### ***Connection between Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Since I intend to teach *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after a unit on *Hamlet*, comparison the plays will be a discussion of the relationship between fathers and their daughters—Polonius and Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Egeus and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This comparison will lead nicely into a discussion of father-daughter relationships today, especially the issues involving dating and marriage.

The issue of arranged marriages is not as obsolete as many of my students think. Arranged marriages are still practiced in Japan, where 25 to 50% of the marriages are arranged (“Arranged Marriage”). In many Arabic countries the practice of arranged marriage is the rule rather than the exception. In the March 6, 2002, issue of the *Houston Chronicle*, there was an article about a father killing his twenty-six year old daughter because she would not marry the man her father had chosen for her. The family was part of a group of Kurdish immigrants who had been living in Sweden for twenty years. This article would serve as a springboard to a discussion of the relevancy of the father-daughter relationships in both plays to modern life.

Another similarity between the two plays is the use of the play-within-a-play motif. Hamlet uses the acting troupe and his play “The Mouse Trap” to determine the guilt of Claudius, his uncle/father-in-law. The mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* perform *Pyramus and Thisbe* for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Aside from adding humor to the mechanicals’ rendition of the tragedy, the play-within-a-play underscores class differences in the interchanges between audience members and between the audience and the actors. Similar class differences are seen in *Hamlet*, especially in Polonius and Laertes’ belief that Ophelia is not high enough in station to marry Hamlet. They feel that he must, by reason of his birth, marry royalty. Ophelia’s status does not seem to matter to Hamlet, but it certainly does to her father and brother.

A theme which both plays have in common is that of falling in and out of love. Hamlet, whether as part of his pretended madness or not, seems to toy with Ophelia’s affections. In his “Get thee to a nunnery” speech, he states at one point “I did love you once,” but then replies to her affirmation of that love, “You should not have believed me...I loved you not” (III, 1). He treats her badly throughout the play, but after her death claims, “I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers /Could not with all their quantity of love/Make up my sum” (V,1). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is filled with characters falling in and out of love; indeed, that is the main plot.

### ***Setting the Stage***

About a week before beginning *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I will decorate the room with hearts, cupids, and quotations about love. This will help to set the mood and pique student's interest, especially if I do not elaborate on why the room has a new look. The quotations will be from Shakespeare as well as from other writers. (A sample list of quotes appears at the end of this unit.) An eventual discussion of these quotations will easily lead into a discussion on the modern perceptions of love. [As additional motivation, on the day of the discussion, I will play the song "Love Potion #9" as students enter the classroom.]

### ***Journal Writing***

Journal writing will follow the previous discussion as an additional pre-reading activity. Journal topics will include the following:

What is love?

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

Do you believe in love at first sight?

Love is blind. What does this sentence mean, and do you agree with it? Why or why not?

What is courtship or dating like today?

A discussion of these topics should peak the interest of most high school students, especially my seniors, since dating is often the topic of conversation in the hallways and even in the classroom. The fickleness of Shakespeare's lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a universal theme that is quite relevant to my students. A variation of this activity would involve dividing the class into five groups. Each group would lead a class discussion on one of the topics.

### ***Renaissance Poetry***

In order to explore the Renaissance view of love and courtship, I propose two activities. The first will be the study of poetry from the Renaissance period that has a theme of love, including unrequited love. Poetry that will be studied will include Sir Thomas Wyatt's "Whoso List to Hunt," Edmund Spenser's "Sonnet 30" and "Sonnet 67," Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," and Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" and "Sonnet 116."

Wyatt's "Whoso List to Hunt," describing his love for Anne Boleyn and Spenser's "Sonnet 30," a poem comparing the poet's love for a woman to fire and her love for him

to ice, both make use of the theme of unrequited love. This type of love is seen in Helena's pursuit of Demetrius and in Demetrius' pursuit of Hermia. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," mirror the pleas and promises made by several of the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to their not-so-willing love interests. The use of the male "line" was never so eloquently expressed than by Marvell and Marlowe!

Spenser's "Sonnet 67" is an excellent companion poem to his previously mentioned "Sonnet 30." In "Sonnet 67," the woman addressed has been playing a typical love game—playing "hard to get"—a game no different today than in the Renaissance. Students easily identify with this and understand the change that occurs in the woman when she stops being pursued.

Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" is the companion to Marlowe's poem. Raleigh and Marlowe express opposing views on love—one practical and realistic and the other one romantic and idealist. Another poem expressing a practical viewpoint is Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Herrick advises young women to stop looking for the perfect man and be satisfied with what is at hand:

Then be not coy, but use your time;  
And while ye may, go marry:  
For having lost but once your prime,  
You may forever tarry.

A discussion of several of Shakespeare's sonnets will also reveal his feelings on love, especially "Sonnet 130," a humorous poem about a woman who does not fit the Elizabethan view of beauty, and "Sonnet 116," Shakespeare's definition of true love.

The study of these poems should help the students to get an idea of the way love and courtship were viewed in Shakespeare's day. A comparison between the Renaissance and modern views of love will be a natural outgrowth of this mini-poetry unit.

### ***Films Relating to Love and Shakespeare***

In addition to the use of Renaissance poetry to show the view of love in Shakespeare's day, I will show the film *Shakespeare in Love* and/or *Shakespeare in the Classroom*, a short film made by Miramax with the actors from the film discussing Shakespeare's life and the view of love in Elizabethan England. *Shakespeare in the Classroom* is an excellent film to use either as an introduction to the film *Shakespeare in Love* or by itself if time is a factor. *Shakespeare in the Classroom* discusses what is historically known about Shakespeare and shows how the movie takes what little is known and speculates on what might have caused Shakespeare to write *Romeo and Juliet*, a play written around the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with a similar plot but with less dire consequences than in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The film *Shakespeare in Love* is particularly relevant to the study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because the lead female character is Viola de Lesseps, whose father is forcing her to marry against her wishes. Viola wishes to be an actress, something unheard of in her day, since men played both male and female roles. Viola dresses up like a young man (Thomas Kent, the "son" of her nurse) and becomes one of Shakespeare's actors. As herself, she falls in love with Shakespeare and he with her. (In the film, Shakespeare writes "Sonnet 18" for Viola.) In the end she has to acquiesce to her father's wishes, but not before becoming Shakespeare's muse and inspiration, not only for *Romeo and Juliet* but also for *Twelfth Night*.

Viola's initial situation is much like Hermia's. Both have fathers forcing them to acquiesce to an arranged marriage. Both Viola and Hermia are strong willed. Viola is forced to give in to her father in the end, but Hermia wants freedom and is prepared to die for it. She tells her father, Egeus, that she would rather die than marry his choice for her. She states:

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,  
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up  
Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke  
My soul consents not to give sovereignty. (1.1.81-84)

Later in the scene, Hermia readily consents to run away with Lysander, thus circumventing her father's wishes. A discussion and possible paper comparing the circumstances of Viola and Hermia is a natural outgrowth of the use of this film with the play.

There is one problem with showing *Shakespeare in Love* in its entirety; it is rated "R" for a few sexual scenes and brief nudity. For example, one scene that is depicted shows Shakespeare and Viola in bed just as dawn is breaking. The scene is like the one in *Romeo and Juliet*, just before Romeo must flee, complete with much the same dialogue. Depending on the age of the audience, the film could be cut or only parts of the film could be shown.

### ***The Language of Shakespeare***

One consideration before attempting to teach a Shakespearean play is a lesson on the language of Shakespeare. Students will already be familiar with iambic pentameter, blank verse, rhyme, imagery, and figurative language from their study of poetry. In addition, we will have studied enjambed lines, end-stop lines, repetition, and the use of prose in a play written mostly in verse when we studied *Hamlet*. A brief review of these terms is given here with specific reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (The examples from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would best be discussed during the actual reading of the play.)

According to Wesley Van Tassel in Clues to Acting Shakespeare, since Shakespeare is not written in modern speech and is instead composed with a specific rhythmic pattern, the student must first learn what the language is doing and read it according to its rhythm and meter, otherwise the student will not understand what is being said (88). Students should realize that Shakespeare wrote his plays primarily in **blank verse**, the meter that is the closest meter to the rhythm of natural English speech. **Blank verse** is unrhymed **iambic pentameter** lines. (An **iambic foot** is composed of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Iambic pentameter is five of these feet in a line of poetry. It is a dah-DUM dah-DUM dah-DUM dah-DUM dah-DUM rhythm.)

In order to preserve the meter in a regular line of iambic pentameter, sometimes an extra syllable is needed to complete the line. This is sometimes accomplished by using an accent over the “ed” on a past tense verb, meaning that the “ed” must be pronounced as a separate syllable. On the other hand, a line that might have too many syllables can be shortened by the use of an **elision**, a contraction of two words or syllables into one syllable, as in “I’ll” instead of “I will” or “o’er” for “over,” “ne’er” for “never,” “’tis” for “it is,” and “’twill” for “it will.”

Regular iambic lines indicate that the character is in control. The metric stress tells the actors which words to emphasize. The word at the end of each line is important and should be stressed, even briefly in an **enjambéd** line, a line whose sense carries over to the next line. The actor has to emphasize the last word in each line to have it make sense. The line should not be pitched down or swallowed, or the audience will not be able to hear the word. The end of the line should be lifted. This indicates metrically where the line ends.

However, the meter in a Shakespearean play is not always regular. Variations in iambic pentameter are used for dramatic effect. There are rhythm breaks or irregular lines where a stressed word is placed in a normally unstressed position or an extra syllable is added. Words that break the meter are important words and must be emphasized. They give clues as to how the line should be read. According to Sean McEvoy in Shakespeare: The Basics, if every line were regular, the result would be monotonous. Shakespeare varies the metric form to produce specific effects (41-42). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare frequently used lines of less than five feet, especially in the speeches of the fairies and Puck and in some of the speeches in the mechanicals’ play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Other terms relate directly to the pauses and breaths taken in a speech. Shakespeare used colons and commas to cue actors where to pause and what words to emphasize. An **end-stop line** is a line in which both the metric and grammatical endings occur at the end of the line. There is usually a period or semicolon. There should be a full pause and possibly a breath. If the sense of a line carries over to the next line, it is an **enjambéd line**. With an enjambéd line, there should be only a slight pause after the last word in the

line is emphasized. McEvoy adds that a colon is used as an emphatic pause and capital letters were used for both proper names and for words that were particularly important in the context of the speech and should be stressed (41). However, in the Mechanicals' play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in Act V, scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, commas and periods are used for comic effect. They cause the "actors" to pause at the wrong places and emphasize the wrong words. This is seen at the beginning of the prologue to their play:

If we offend, it is with our goodwill.  
That you should think we come not to offend,  
But with goodwill. To show our simple skill,  
That is the true beginning of our end.  
Consider, then, we come but in despite.  
We do not come, as minding to content you,  
Our true intent is. All for your delight  
We are not here. That you should here repent you,  
The actors are at hand, and by their show,  
You shall know all that you are like to know. (5.1.114-24)

Although blank verse is supposed to be unrhymed, Shakespeare does use **rhyme** in his plays, more often in his early plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than in the later plays like *Hamlet*. In fact, 37% of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is written in rhymed verse. The only other Shakespearean play with more rhyme is *Love's Labor's Lost* (Widdicombe 43).

Rhyme can sometimes be used for comic effect or to create a light-hearted or teasing tone. It can also be used to show a bantering or challenging tone. In addition, rhyme can be used seriously. Regardless of the purpose of the rhyme, the actor must play to the rhyme and emphasize it. It is there for a purpose (McEvoy 49-50). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the love scenes involving discussions about love are written in **rhymed couplets**.

Rhyme is used for humor in the play-within-a-play, in the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, put on by the mechanicals. The rhymed couplet at the beginning of this speech by Flute as Thisbe, along with the word choice and punctuation create an absurdly humorous effect:

Asleep, my love?  
What, dead, my dove?  
O Pyramus, arise!  
Speak, speak. Quite dumb?  
Must cover thy sweet eyes.  
These lily lips,  
This cheery nose,



These yellow cowslip cheeks  
Are gone, are gone! (5.1.341-350)

**Prose** is also used in Shakespeare's plays. Prose was often used for letters and proclamations, for the speech of characters of low status, as an expression of madness, or for comedy (Gibson, *Acting Shakespeare*, 71). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is approximately 2,150 lines long, and almost 400 of those lines are in prose (*MND with Related Readings* 12). Switching from verse to prose may indicate that a character is losing control or becoming confused, but not necessarily. Servants "speaking nobly" may use verse, and nobles "chatting informally" may use prose (*MND with Related Readings* 12). The change from verse to prose in a scene is abrupt and sets the speech apart from what came before (Epstein 218). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus and other nobles speak almost always in blank verse, but they use prose when they watch the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* during the wedding celebration. "This serves as a contrast to the elevated speech of the mechanicals' play" (*MND with Related Readings* 12). In addition, the refined and elegant verse of Titania contrasts sharply to the prose of Bottom, emphasizing the absurd nature of Titania's "love" for Bottom.

The use of **repetition** also adds to the humor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom's speech is very amusing as he uses repetition in combination with rhyme as Pyramus in Act 5:

O grim-looking night! O night with hue so black!  
O night, which ever art when day is not!  
O night! O night! Alack, alack, alack!  
I fear my Thisbe's promise is forgot. (5.1.179-182)

In addition, Quince as the Prologue in the mechanicals' play overuses **alliteration** for comic effect:

Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,  
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast. (5.1.155-156)

The use of malapropisms, mispronunciation, and plain misspeaking by the mechanicals, especially Bottom, add to the comic effect of the play. One example of misspeaking is seen when the mechanicals first discuss the play that they intend to perform at the wedding feast of Theseus and Hippolyta. Bottom says to Peter Quince, "Say what the play treats on, then read the names of the actors, and so *grow to a point*" (1.2.8-10). "Grow to a point" is Bottom's way of say "come to a conclusion." It makes perfect sense; it is just an odd way of expressing drawing a conclusion. A few lines later, Bottom mispronounces the name Hercules by saying, "I could play Ercles" (1.2.29). In another example, Bottom is trying to convince Quince that he (Bottom) should play the part of the lion. He states, "But I will *aggravate* my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale" (1.2.78-80). Bottom is

trying to say that he will make his roar quiet or temperate so as not to frighten the ladies watching the play; however, “aggravate” is the opposite of what he means. A fourth example is seen in Act IV, Scene 1, line 40. Bottom states to Titania, “I have an *exposition* of sleep come upon me.” Bottom probably means that he has a *disposition* to sleep, not an “exposition of sleep.” In a final example, Bottom is discussing where the players might find a quiet place to rehearse, and he says, “We will meet, and there [in the woods] we may rehearse most *obscenely* and courageously” (1.2.103-104). Their rehearsal is most definitely not obscene. Bottom’s diction or word choice, his overacting, and his ability to adapt to any absurd situation add greatly to the humor in the play.

### **During the Reading of the Play**

There are four different worlds or groups represented in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: the world of myth and legend with Theseus and Hippolyta; the world of the young lovers, which could exist anywhere and in any age; the world of the fairies and the literary lore of Titania, Oberon, and Puck; and the world of the mechanicals that come out of Shakespeare’s countryside (Bloom 149). As we explore these worlds, we will discuss the various love “affairs” in the play, as well as fickleness of love as seen in the interchangeability between Lysander and Demetrius and between Hermia and Helena.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is truly a play of opposites and disparate elements. We have “homely and realistic characters” set in a “fantastic, almost surrealistic plot” (Epstein 110). The lower classes mix with the upper classes. There is lyrical poetry and rustic prose. There are characters from Greek mythology, English fairies, characters from English folklore, and characters based on commoners from an English village. Yet the play is set in Athens. The play is, as its title suggests, a dream. This dreamlike atmosphere of the fairy woods allows for the audience’s entrance into a supernatural world of fairies and enchantment, of love potions and spells. Throughout this dream, Shakespeare explores the meaning of love. Is it fickle? Is love truly blind? Is love merely a ridiculous farce? As Puck says, “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (3.2.117)

Love at first sight is “mockingly explored in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (Charney 9). There is no moderation in love. There is no progression or development of love, thus the play explores love at first sight. Love is unpredictable. The “mind can create whatever images it wants to, even those that contradict the evidence of the senses, especially the eyes” (Charney 31). Love is an irrational force, especially when it is induced by the love potion. Oberon states in reference to the love potion:

The juice of it on the sleeping eyelids laid  
Will make man or woman madly dote  
Upon the next live creature that it sees. (2.1.176-78)

The love potion is originally obtained to use on Titania, as leverage by Oberon to obtain a “changeling” boy. When Titania awakens, she is immediately enamored of Bottom, the

weaver. This love is especially ludicrous since Puck has changed the head of her “lover” into that of an ass. Titania says to Bottom upon first awakening:

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.  
Mine ear is much enamored of thy note,  
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape,  
And thy fair virtue’s force perforce doth move me  
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee. (3.1. 139-44)

Bottom, however, not under the influence of the potion, is still rational and states:

Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. Any yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. (3.1.144-46)

Bottom sees that love and reason do not necessarily go together. Love is something Titania supposedly has for Bottom, but Bottom remains himself, basically unmoved by Titania’s protestations. He is more interested in talking to the fairies and in eating than he is in Titania’s love. Interestingly, Bottom is the only one of the humans to see and converse with the fairies, and, as usual, he takes it in stride. According to Bloom, Bottom has an innate ability “to remain himself in any circumstance” (152).

The plot of a love comedy is built on overcoming difficulties. Lysander expresses this premise at the beginning of the play, stating, “The course of true love never did run smooth” (1.1.136). What follows in the play is Lysander’s statement taken to the extreme.

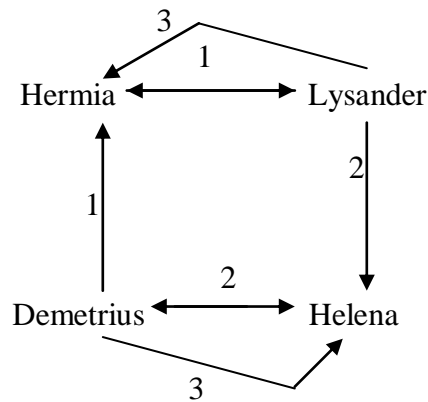
Northrop Frye, in his essay “The Bottomless Dream,” argues that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* follows the typical three-part format of a Shakespearean comedy. The first part shows an absurd, unpleasant, or irrational situation. The second part involves confused identity and personal complications. The third part concerns plot twists, but everything comes out right at the end (134-35).

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* part one of the comedy format concerns the irrational law that requires Hermia to marry according to her father’s wishes or either die or live the rest of her life in a convent. In addition, we have the absurd relationships between the lovers. Lysander loves Hermia, and Hermia loves Lysander. However, Demetrius also loves Hermia. He used to love Helena, but now he does not. Helena though still loves Demetrius. We have a weird love quadrangle instead of a triangle.

Part two of the comedy format begins in the fairy woods where confusion and love potions reign. Now the lovers’ relationships really get complicated thanks to Puck’s inadvertent use of the love potion on Lysander instead of on Demetrius. (Oberon had wanted Demetrius to have the love potion so that he would love the Athenian maid Helena who was so enamored with him.) However, Lysander is anointed by mistake and

when he awakens in the woods, he now “loves” Helena. Once Oberon discovers Puck’s mistake, he has Demetrius anointed with the love potion so that he awakens to see Helena. At this point both Lysander and Demetrius swear their love to Helena. Understandably, Helena thinks they are playing a joke on her, and that even Hermia is in on it. We now have a different triangle with Hermia as the “odd man out.”

Part three of the comedy reconciles the lovers by having Lysander re-anointed with an antidote to the love potion so that he awakens to see Hermia first. Thus the quadrangle becomes two contented sets of lovers. The following diagram depicts the situation:



Confusing, isn’t it? That was the point. Shakespeare meant for confusion to reign as he shows that love is both blind and fickle.

Shakespeare shows throughout all of the love and madness in the play that love is truly blind and follows no natural law. Helena loves a man, Demetrius, who is shown to be fickle. He professed his love first to Helena and then is smitten with love for Hermia when he first meets her. The more Helena chases Demetrius, the more he spurns her and treats her like a dog. This situation is similar to Edmund Spenser’s “Sonnet 30,” in which the poet wonders why his “fire” hardens his love’s “ice” and why her “heart frozen cold” enkindles his “fire.” Shakespeare seems to be saying that love does not make sense. Otherwise, why would Helena continue to chase a man who has clearly made his dislike for her known? She continues to accept his abuse in the name of love. Hermia is involved in a similar situation with Demetrius, but in reverse. The more she spurns him, the more he wants her. This is expressed in the following exchange between Helena and Hermia:

Hermia: The more I hate, the more he follows me.

Helena: The more I love, the more he hateth me. (1.1.203-204)

Although their love quadrangle is “solved” in the end, one wonders what would happen if the love potion placed on Demetrius ever wears off. Since Lysander and Demetrius and Hermia and Helena are almost interchangeable to the reader or viewer,

does it really matter who loves whom? As far as Puck and, possibly, Shakespeare are concerned, as long as the lovers are paired up, all is well. At least for now!

Aside from the theme of love, I also intend to emphasize the comic language in the play in the scenes with the mechanicals, much of which is discussed earlier in the section on Shakespeare's language, and in the name-calling between the young lovers. In Act III, scene 2, Hermia and Helena trade insults, with Helena emphasizing Hermia's diminutive size and dark coloring and Hermia emphasizing Helena's height by calling her a "maypole." The scene is an Elizabethan version of a modern "cat" fight, something that happens occasionally at school and that students would identify with immediately.

### **After Reading the Play**

#### ***Essay Assignment***

The culminating essay at the conclusion of the unit will be a paper comparing love and courtship in Shakespeare's day to modern views of love and courtship. In the section of the essay concerning the Renaissance view of love and courtship, students would need to refer to the play, as well as at least two of the poems discussed at the beginning of the unit. (See the Renaissance Poetry section in the narrative or Sample Lesson Plan One.) In addition, a minimum of five quotations must be included in the paper as part of the students' support or elaboration. Students may restrict their discussion to a specific aspect of love (i.e., unrequited love or love at first sight) or to a more general discussion of love and courtship.

#### ***Scenes to View and Enact***

I intend to show scenes from various film versions of the play, as well as have students act out certain scenes. (See Lesson Plan Two for ideas on student acting.) In showing the different film interpretations, we will analyze the director's techniques, including the use of special effects and the interpretation of character. The versions that we will study include the 1909 black and white silent film, Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), and the 1935 version with Mickey Rooney. One additional film may be useful for students. In the Robin Williams' film *Dead Poets Society*, the play is used as a metaphor of *carpe diem*. The film highlights several scenes with Puck, including his last speech, as seen on a high school stage. This last speech could be compared to film versions to show the difference between stage and screen adaptations. (See Lesson Plan Three.)

### **QUOTATIONS FOR "SETTING THE STAGE"**

#### ***Quotations from Shakespeare:***

"Love is merely a madness."—*As You Like It*

“Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,  
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.”—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

“The course of true love never did run smooth.”—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea,  
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,  
The more I have, for both are infinite.”—*Romeo and Juliet*

Hear my soul speak:  
The very instant that I saw you, did  
My heart fly to your service.”—*The Tempest*

“If thou remember’st not the slightest folly  
That ever love did make thee run into,  
Thou hast not loved.”—*As You Like It*

“Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love.”—*Hamlet*

“See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.  
O that I were a glove upon that hand,  
That I might touch that cheek.”—*Romeo and Juliet*

“Love’s not Times fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.”—“Sonnet 116”

“The sight of lovers feedeth those in love.”—*As You Like It*

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.”—“Sonnet 18”

“For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.”—“Sonnet 29”

***Other Quotations on Love:***

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”—  
The Bible, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians

“Love covers a multitude of sins.”—The Bible, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter

“In dreams and in love there are no impossibilities.”—Janos Arany

“Love comes from blindness, friendship from knowledge.”—Compte des Bussy-Rabutin

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”—Fanny Fern

“Life is one fool thing after another whereas love is two fool things after each other.”—Oscar Wilde

“All, everything that I understand, I understand only because of love.”—Leo Tolstoy

“Young love is a flame; very pretty, often very hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. The love of the older and disciplined heart is as coals, deep burning, unquenchable.”—Henry Ward Beecher

“Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence.”—Henry Louis Mencken

“Love is a canvas furnished by Nature and embroidered by imagination.”—Voltaire

“Love conquers all; Let us yield to Love.”—Virgil

“All’s fair in love and war.”—Francis Edward Smedley

“’Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.”—Alfred Lord Tennyson

“There’s nothing like unrequited love to take all the taste out of a peanut butter sandwich.”—Charles Schulz

“The heart has its reasons, of which the mind knows nothing.”—Blaise Pascal

## **SAMPLE LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan One: Love Poetry from the Renaissance**

This lesson will explore the Renaissance view of love and courtship, including unrequited love.

#### ***Objectives***

The student will:

- interpret the possible influences of the historical context on a literary work,

- connect literature to historical contexts, current events, and his/her own experiences,
- analyze literary elements as they relate to meaning,
- produce a summary or précis of selection studied,
- recognize and interpret poetic elements, such as metaphor, simile, personification, and the effect of sound on meaning,
- use elements of text to defend his/her own responses and interpretations,
- recognize and discuss themes and connections across cultures and time periods,
- identify stanza form and rhyme scheme, and
- write an explication of a poem.

### ***Selections***

(Selections come from *The Language of Literature*, published by McDougal Littell, and from *Adventures in English Literature*, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.)

“Whoso List to Hunt,” by Sir Thomas Wyatt  
 “Sonnet 30” and “Sonnet 67,” by Edmund Spenser  
 “To His Coy Mistress,” by Andrew Marvell  
 “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” by Robert Herrick  
 “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” by Christopher Marlowe  
 “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” by Sir Walter Raleigh  
 “Sonnet 130,” and “Sonnet 116,” by William Shakespeare

### ***Procedures***

- 1) Review of poetry terms, including imagery, figurative language, rhyme, meter, and sound devices.
- 2) Introduction to the sonnet form (Italian, Shakespearean, and Spenserian forms).
- 3) Reading and discussion of the poetry
  - a) “Whoso List to Hunt” should be paired with “Sonnet 30.” Both poems concern the theme of unrequited love, much like that of Helena for Demetrius and Demetrius for Hermia at the beginning of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
  - b) “Whoso List to Hunt” can also be paired with Spenser’s “Sonnet 67.” Both poems make use of an extended metaphor of a hunter (the poet) pursuing a deer (the woman). Both poems concern the theme of unrequited love. In “Whoso List to Hunt,” the poet must give up his “hunt” since the woman in question belongs to King Henry VIII. However, in “Sonnet 67,” although Spenser gives up his quest, he discovers the quarry was only playing hard-to-get, a game well understood by students today.
  - c) The pairing of “To His Coy Mistress” and “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” can lead to a discussion of male “persuasive techniques,” not so different



- today than when these poems were written. Raleigh's reply ("The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd") shows the more practical or realistic view of love. In Act II, scene 2, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander's argument to Hermia about sleeping together before marriage makes these poems quite appropriate to a later discussion when reading this scene.
- d) A discussion of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," shows a different view—one practical for the Renaissance, but maybe not so practical for today. To Herrick, women should stop looking for Mr. Right and settle on a man who wants them, or they may not get married at all. During the Renaissance, this was a reasonable suggestion, since women were linked socially and financially to their husbands. There were few options for a single woman. This is not the case today where a woman can make her own way in the world without the help of a husband.
  - e) Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116" expresses Shakespeare's definition of true love, while "Sonnet 130" is a humorous look at beauty. The woman is just the opposite of the Elizabethan view of womanly beauty, but the poet loves her just the same. (Love is blind.)
- 4) Students will write a précis after we read and discuss each poem. These short summaries will help the student's remember the theme of each poem for use in later assignments and in relating them to the play as we read.
  - 5) After discussing the views of love and courtship expressed in each poem, students will write a journal article comparing the Renaissance view of love and courtship to the students' personal view of love and courtship or romance.
  - 6) Each student will write an explication or analysis of one of the poems in this unit. They will first complete the following information on a pre-writing worksheet before writing their explication:

Title of the Poem:

Author:

Overall theme:

Tone: (include phrases or lines that show tone)

Stanza form or structure, including rhyme scheme:

Paraphrase of poem:

Examples of imagery and figurative language:

### **Lesson Plan Two: Student Performances**

Students will conclude their study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by working in small groups to perform a scene from the play.

## ***Objectives***

The student will:

- Use effective verbal and non-verbal strategies,
- Clarify and reflect meaning of text through performance,
- Analyze literary elements for their contribution to the meaning of the text,
- Analyze text structure for its influence on meaning,
- Determine text's main ideas, and
- Use elements of text to defend his/her (group's) own responses and interpretations.

## ***Materials***

Xeroxed copies of scenes, pens, highlighters

## ***Procedures***

1. Students will break into small groups and choose one of the scenes listed at the end of this lesson plan.
2. Groups will read through their scene several times to get a “feel” for what is happening. They will answer the following questions:
  - Where is the scene set?
  - What is going on?
  - Who are the characters? What is their motivation? What do they want?
3. The groups will discuss how they intend to present the scene and choose a director and actors.
4. The group will mark on their scripts the blocking, tone of voice, words to be stressed, gestures, facial expressions, etc., of each character.
5. Groups will decide on any necessary changes to the script. They will need to be able to defend any changes (vocabulary changes, lines deleted, etc.).
6. Students will decide on costuming and props necessary for the scene.
7. Rehearsal time will depend on the time available at the end of the unit. (If time is not sufficient to have students memorize their lines, they may use a script.)
8. Groups will perform the scene before the class and be prepared to defend changes and interpretation.

## ***Suggested Scenes***

All scenes are from the 1993 Folger Library edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

1. Act I, scene 1, lines 130-182—Lysander and Hermia
2. Act I, scene 1, lines 183-231—Lysander, Hermia, and Helena
3. Act I, scene 2 (all lines)—Quince, Bottom, Flute, Starveling, Snout, Snug
4. Act II, scene 1, lines 195-251—Helena and Demetrius

5. Act III, scene 2, lines 283-365—Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius
6. Act IV, scene 1, lines 1-46—Titania, Bottom, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mustardseed
7. Act V, scene 1, lines 114-218—Theseus, Lysander, Hippolyta, Quince, Demetrius, Snout, Bottom, Flute
8. Act V, scene 1, lines 232-364—Snug, Theseus, Demetrius, Lysander, Starveling, Hippolyta, Flute, Bottom

### ***Grading Criteria for Individual Actors***

The student will clarify meaning through performance:

- Voice: Projects voice
- Varies tone/pitch effectively
- Enunciates clearly
- Interprets rhythm effectively
- Uses appropriate facial expressions
- Uses appropriate body language/gestures
- Uses appropriate staging/blocking
- Adequately defends interpretation and changes to the text

### **Lesson Plan Three: Film Interpretations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

#### ***Objectives***

The student will:

- analyze and critique various film adaptations of a play,
- analyze different director's interpretations of key scenes,
- evaluate the acting quality, setting, and staging of each film version, and
- recognize how visual and sound techniques of design such as special effects, editing, camera angles, reaction shots, sequencing, and music convey messages.

***Videos to view*** (See complete video information under Filmography in the Annotated Bibliography at the end of the unit.)

*Dead Poets Society*. Directed by Peter Weir and Starring Robin Williams.

*Silent Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1909.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1935, with Mickey Rooney as Puck.

*William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1999, with Michelle Pfeiffer, Kevin Kline, Calista Flockhart, Stanley Tucci, and Rupert Everett.

### ***Procedures***

1. Students will view and discuss specific scenes from these three versions of the play. First, we will watch *Silent Shakespeare* and discuss the use of special effects from that time period. Students will also discuss their reaction to a silent film adaptation.
2. The scene from *Silent Shakespeare* with Puck and Oberon and the young lovers will be compared with the same scene in the other two films.
3. Students will work in small groups to complete the following questionnaire and then share their findings with the rest of the class.

#### Viewing Questionnaire:

1. What did you like about each film's interpretation of the scene?
  2. What did you dislike?
  3. Discuss the use of special effects in each film.
  4. How did the editing, camera angles, reaction shots, and music add to or detract from each adaptation? (Students may need to view portions of the films more than once.)
  5. What changes did the directors make to the original play? Why were the changes made? Were they necessary? Do you agree with the changes? Why or why not?
  6. If you were the director, how would you film the scene?
4. Students will watch Puck's speeches, especially his final speech, as seen in *Dead Poets Society* and compare this stage version to at least one of the movie versions. Students will take notes on and discuss the differences between the scene performed on stage and in film.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Adventures in English Literature*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

I used this text for “Sonnet 67” by Spenser and “Whoso List to Hunt” by Wyatt.

Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Barber has good commentary on Titania and Bottom, parody, and fairies.

Bloom, Harold. “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. pp. 148-70.

The discussion of Bottom is especially interesting.

Charney, Maurice. *Shakespeare in Love and Lust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

This is a good discussion of love in Shakespeare’s comedies.

Draper, R.P. *Shakespeare: The Comedies*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000.

Draper analyzes various passages, emphasizing types of characters: dupes, fools, etc.

Epstein, Norrie. *The Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of The Bard*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

This is an easy to read and an often humorous look at a variety of topics from Shakespeare’s life to his plays. Along the way, the reader will find lots of fun trivia.

Fry, Northrop. “The Bottomless Dream.” *A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Related Readings*. Ed. Don Saliani, Chris Ferguson, and Tim Scott. Albany: International Thomson Publishing, 1998: 134-135.

This essay discusses the structure of the play.

Gibson, Rex. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Gibson gives an excellent discussion of the language and ideas for acting a scene.

Gibson, Rex and Janet Field-Pickering. *Discovering Shakespeare’s Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This book discusses the use of rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and verse in the play.

Huston, J. Dennis. “Parody and Play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” In *Shakespeare’s Comedies of Play*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981. pp. 94-121.

Huston discusses the issues of parody and love in MND.

*The Language of Literature*. Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 2000.

I used this text for the poetry of Marlowe, Raleigh, Shakespeare, Marvell, Herrick, and Spenser's "Sonnet 30."

McEvoy, Sean. *Shakespeare: The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

This book contains an easy to understand discussion of Shakespeare's language, verse, performance, and genres.

Palmer, John. "Bottom." In *Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. London: Macmillan, 1947. pp. 92-109.

Palmer offers a good discussion of the character of Bottom.

Quennell, Peter and Hamish Johnson. *Who's Who in Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

This is an excellent reference for Shakespeare's characters, including their origins.

Schanzer, Ernest. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In *Shakespeare: The Comedies*.

Edited by Kenneth Muir. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965. pp. 26-31.  
Schanzer discusses the love and madness theme in the play.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Folger Library Edition. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

———. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Folger Library Edition. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.

———. *A Midsummer Night's Dream with Related Readings*. Edited by Don Saliani, Chris Ferguson, and Tim Scott. Albany: International Thomson Publishing, 1998.

This book provides good introductory material on the play as well as excellent related reading to use in conjunction with the play.

Shintri, Sarojini. "Hermia." In *A Midsummer Night's Dream with Related Readings*.

Edited by Don Saliani, Chris Ferguson, and Tim Scott. Albany: International Thomson Publishing, 1998. pp. 119-23.

Shintri offers an interesting commentary on the character of Hermia.

Van Tassel, Wesley. *Clues to Acting Shakespeare*. New York: Allworth Press, 2000.

This is an excellent source for ideas for acting and reading aloud a Shakespearean play, especially the section for secondary schools.

Widdicombe, Toby. *Simply Shakespeare*. New York: Longman, 2002.

This reference contains chapters on Shakespeare's language, imagery, rhetoric, humor, genres, stagecraft, and performance. It also contains an appendix of books, websites, and journals.

Williams, Carol J. "Honor Killing Raises Debate among Swedes." In *The Houston Chronicle*. March 6, 2002, Sec. 33A.

This article describes the murder of a daughter by her father for her refusal of an arranged marriage. The father is a Kurdish immigrant who has lived in Sweden twenty years.

## **Filmography**

Hoffman, Michael (director). *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. 130 min.

This modern interpretation students should enjoy, especially those of high school age.

Madden, John (director). *Shakespeare in Love*. Miramax Films, 1998. 122 min.

This film could be used in a high school class to introduce any Shakespearean play dealing with love. It is a good film to show the attitudes of the time period; however, it is rated "R."

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Warner Brothers, 1935. 117 min.

This is one of the most well known versions of the play, with Mickey Rooney as Puck. Black and white.

*Shakespeare in the Classroom*. Miramax Film, 1999. 46 min.

This video takes a look at Shakespeare from the viewpoint of the actors who filmed *Shakespeare in Love*. The video can be used instead of the film or in conjunction with *Shakespeare in Love*.

*Shakespeare in London: The Life and Times of the Real William Shakespeare*. Goldhill Video, 1999. 50 min.

The video is illustrated by dramatic reconstructions of Elizabethan life, scenes from the plays, a biography of Shakespeare which places him in historical context, the city of London, etc.

*Silent Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1909. 12 min.

This silent film is very interesting—good to use for the Viewing and Representing strand of the English Project CLEAR curriculum, especially for stage directions and special effects. Black and white.

Wier, Peter (director). *Dead Poets Society*. Touchtone Home Video. 128 min.

This film shows parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed on a high school stage. Starring Robin Williams.

## Internet Resources

<http://www.askasia.org/frclasrm/readings/r000153.htm>

Asia Society. "Arranged Marriage." In *Video Letter from Japan: My Family*, 1988. pp. 36-37.

This article contains interesting information about arranged marriages in Japan.

<http://freespace.virgin.net/mark.fryer/love.htm>

Fryer, Mark. "Quotez: Love."

This site lists most of the quotes I used for the "Setting the Stage" section of the unit and many, many more.

<http://www.bardweb.net>

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare Research Center.

This website contains a good synopsis of each act and has links to other sites.

<http://quarles.unbc.edu/midsummer/mythintro.html>

"Mythology in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

This website contains hyperlinks to mythological characters.

<http://www.gradesaver.com/ClassNotes/titles/midsummernight>

Smith, J.N. "ClassicNote on *Midsummer Night's Dream*." Classic Notes by Grade Saver. June 2000.

This site contains a good summary and analysis of each act.

<http://www.pathguy.com/mnd.htm>

Friedlander, Ed. "Enjoying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare." (January 20, 2001).

This interesting site contains summaries of the plays and links to other sources.

<http://quarles.unbc.edu/midsummer>

Siedlecki, Basia. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Shakespeare On-Line at UNBC*.

The entire text of the play is presented with hyperlinks to definitions of words and phrases. There are also links to mythological characters.