

SPEAK THE SPEECH

HELENA: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

"HOW HAPPY SOME O'ER
OTHER SOME CAN BE..."

Who's Helena?

Helena is one of the young people who live in the city of Athens who are often referred to as 'the lovers' in the play. Other characters describe Helena as 'fair' and 'sweet'.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

The speech comes at the end of Helena's first scene in the play. Before this, we've heard that Demetrius, who's trying to marry Hermia, had previously expressed interest in Helena. Demetrius had 'won her soul', so now Helena 'dotes, dotes in idolatry' upon Demetrius. Hermia is in love with Lysander and the pair have decided to run away, traveling through the forest to a place where they can get married. They've just shared their plans with Helena and have exited, so Helena is alone to talk with the audience.

THE SPEECH

How happy some o'er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know:
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities:
Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:
And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.

As waggish boys in game themselves forswear,
So the boy Love is perjured every where:
For ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne,
He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.
I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight:
Then to the wood will he to-morrow night
Pursue her; and for this intelligence
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense:
But herein mean I to enrich my pain,
To have his sight thither and back again.

THE SPEECH: INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTS

Here's the speech, broken down into individual thoughts. Please note: this is just one way to break down the thoughts. It's subjective!

How happy some o'er other some can be!

Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.

But what of that?

Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know:

And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;

Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:

And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.

As waggish boys in game themselves forswear,
So the boy Love is perjured every where:

For ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne,
He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.

I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight:

Then to the wood will he to-morrow night
Pursue her;

and for this intelligence
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense:

But herein mean I to enrich my pain,
To have his sight thither and back again.



WORDS & PHRASES (that might be new or have an unexpected meaning)

- **fair** – The earliest meaning of the word 'fair' was beautiful
- **errs** – There's some interesting debate on the right way to pronounce this word, but it seems the original way sounds like 'airs'. It means to make an error or be mistaken.
- **doting** – loving in an excessive, uncritical way
- **base** – low quality
- **vile** – despicable or disgusting
- **holding no quantity** – having no value
- **transpose** – transform
- **dignity** – in this case, worthiness
- **painted blind** – depicted in paintings wearing a blindfold
- **unheedy** – careless
- **haste** – excessive speed or urgency; hurry
- **beguiled** – fooled or tricked
- **waggish** – mischievous
- **forswear** – swear falsely
- **perjured** – exposed as a liar
- **ere** – before
- **eyne** – eyes
- **flight** – running away
- **wood** – forest
- **intelligence** – information
- **dear** – it's a double meaning here: 'dear' can mean 'regarded with deep affection,' or it can mean 'expensive'
- **herein** – in this way
- **thither** – to that place

EXPLORE

Use your brain, your heart, your imagination, your voice and/or your movement to embody this character and express yourself through the words. Try it lots of different ways as you follow these prompts

ACTIVITY #1: EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE

EXPLORE THE WORDS

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- What do the words sound like?
- Are there any sounds that repeat?

EXPLORE THE VERSE

- If you're able, speak the speech and throw a small ball or a rolled-up pair of socks as you say the last word of each verse line. It's a gentle toss, straight up in the air, that you catch again. This is to give you an awareness of the end of the verse line. What do you notice? How do the thoughts end with the ends of the verse line? Does this change? When do they spill over to the next line?
- Now try speaking the last word of each verse line and allow them to resonate with you. Some people believe that you can get a sense of the speech just from these words. What do you think?

ACTIVITY #2: EXPLORE THE IDEAS

THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE

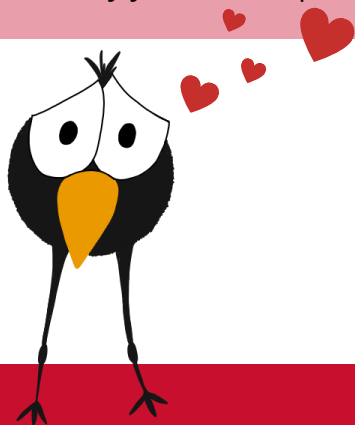
Not only does Helena have to witness a best friend in happy relationship, but that same best friend is the crush of the person Helena loves.

- Can you imagine being in Helena's position?
- How would you respond if your love for someone wasn't returned?
- How would you feel if that person loved your best friend?
- How does this affect the way you do the speech?

WHAT'S WITH CUPID?

Helena discusses love in the context of the classical Roman character of Cupid. In this tradition, Cupid is often portrayed as a mischievous child with wings who is blindfolded. These qualities help Helena make sense of unrequited love.

- If you were to personify love based on your ideas, what qualities would make sense to you?
- What would your personification look like?



ACTIVITY #3: EXPLORE THE CHARACTER



CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS

Notice the way Helena talks about **Hermia** versus the way Helena talks about **Demetrius**. What does that tell you about their relationships?

- Why do you think Helena focuses on Hermia's eyes, but only mentions Demetrius's "qualities". What do you think that means?

CHARACTER CHOICES

Why do you think Helena decides to tell Demetrius that Hermia is running away with Lysander? Would you have done the same thing? If not, can you see why Helena might choose to do so?

ACTIVITY #4: CHALLENGE THE WORDS

Words change meaning over time... The word 'fair' originally meant beautiful. In England at the time Shakespeare was writing, wealthy people started using toxic chemicals and harsh cosmetics to whiten their skin, and light skin became fashionable. Because of this fashionable association of light skin with beauty, the word 'fair' evolved to mean light skin. In Shakespeare's plays and poems, it's hard to tell which meaning of the word 'fair' is being evoked and at times, it is clearly contrasted with 'black'.

Today, we each have our own associations with words based on our experiences.

- How do you feel about the word 'fair'?
- Would you prefer to use a different word as you make this speech your own?
- What words might you substitute that would still fit with the rhythm and metre of the speech?
- Are there other short (one-syllable) words that mean desirable or beautiful to you?

