



Who's Who in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The play begins in Athens, then moves to an enchanted forest, or “wood”. When two groups of Athenians get caught up in the magic of the Fairies, there’s much mischief and mayhem.

The Court (the young lovers and the adults around them)

Theseus is the leader of Athens and a great hero of Greek legend. The events of the play coincide with Theseus’s wedding. Shakespeare’s play, however, isn’t set in a specific time period.

Hippolyta, leader of the Amazons, prepares to marry Theseus. The Amazons were famous warriors in ancient mythology. The play ends with the couple’s wedding festivities.

Theseus describes **Philostrate** as the “manager of mirth.” Philostrate presents Theseus and Hippolyta with the different options for entertainment at the end of the play.

Egeus may have been inspired by a common character type in classical Roman comedy: a parent seeking to force their child into an unwanted marriage.

Hermia, Egeus’s child, is in love with Lysander. Egeus, however, insists that Hermia marry Demetrius.

Lysander is in love with Hermia. Since they can’t get permission to marry one another, they run away together.

Demetrius is also in love with Hermia and is Egeus’ choice of partner for Hermia. Demetrius follows Hermia and Lysander into the wood.

Helena (or Helen) is Hermia’s friend and is in love with Demetrius. Helena follows the others into the wood.

The “Mechanicals” (the workers who put on a play)

Quince, the carpenter, writes the play *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe* and organizes its performance for Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding.

Bottom, the weaver, is cast as the lover, Pyramus, in Peter Quince’s play. While rehearsing in the forest, Bottom is transformed by magic and given the head of a donkey (called an ass).

Flute, the bellows-mender, is cast as the lady, Thisbe, in Peter Quince’s play. In Shakespeare’s day, boys and young men played the women’s parts in plays.

Starveling, the tailor, is originally cast as Thisbe’s mother, but in the final performance, portrays the moon instead.

Snout, the tinker, is originally cast as Pyramus’ father in Peter Quince’s play, but in the final performance portrays the wall that stands between the lovers.

Snug, the joiner, plays the lion in Peter Quince’s play.

The Fairies (the magical spirits that rule the forest)

Titania is one leader of the fairies. Titania is raising an orphaned human child and refuses to give it to Oberon, who uses magic to gain an advantage in their argument.

Oberon is the other leader of the fairies. Oberon uses magic to win an argument, but also to help others.

Puck is a spirit who follows and serves Oberon. Mischievous and impulsive, Puck is also called Robin Goodfellow.

The fairies who follow Titania are named **Peaseblossom**, **Cobweb**, **Moth** and **Mustardseed**. These names reflect the close association of fairies with the natural world.

Note: Nowadays, when most people hear the word “fairy”, they think of tiny, winged, childlike, magical creatures. However, these images of fairies became popular in Victorian times, a few hundred years after Shakespeare wrote his plays. For an Elizabethan like Shakespeare, fairies were part of a rich folklore, and were often portrayed as mysterious forces of nature that were usually unpredictable and often malevolent. In other words, they could be quite powerful and scary.

For an overview of what these characters experience in the play, please see our Discovery Zone resource, *What Happens in A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Questions for you to consider

- Which characters are most interesting to you? Who do you want to know more about? What makes you want to know more?
- The characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fall into three groups: the Court, the 'Mechanicals', and the Fairies. Which group is most familiar to you? Which is most interesting?
- As you imagine the three worlds these groups inhabit, how would you make them distinct from one another? What might the characters wear? How might they move? What might they care about? How is each group distinct, and yet part of the same play?
- As you continue to learn about the characters, think about how you might cast actors to play them. You could take a realistic approach, casting people you know. Or you could take a fantasy approach and include famous people. Who would your dream cast be?