



## A Closer Look at

# "How happy some o'er other some can be..."

**This speech is spoken by  
Helena in Act 1, Scene 1 of  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream***

### Who's Helena?

Helena is a young person from Athens whom the play refers to as one of 'the lovers'. Other characters in the play describe Helena as sweet.

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### What's happening when this speech is spoken?

This speech comes at the end of Helena's first scene. Before this, we learn that Demetrius, who's trying to marry Helena's best friend, Hermia, had previously expressed love for Helena. Demetrius had 'won her soul', so now Helena 'dotes, devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry' upon Demetrius.


However, Hermia is in love with Lysander. These two 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.

*HELENA:*

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: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

How happy some o'er other some can be!	Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.	And therefore is Love said to be a child, Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.
But what of that?	As waggish boys in game themselves forswear, So the boy Love is perjured every where:
Demetrius thinks not so;	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.
He will not know what all but he do know:	I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight:
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes, So I, admiring of his qualities:	Then to the wood will he to-morrow night Pursue her;
Things base and vile, holding no quantity, Love can transpose to form and dignity:	and for this intelligence If I have thanks, it is a dear expense:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:	But herein mean I to enrich my pain, To have his sight thither and back again.
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;	

## Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **o'er** -- over
- **fair** - The earliest meaning of the word 'fair' was beautiful
- **errs** - makes a mistake; There's some interesting debate on the right way to pronounce this word, but it seems the original way sounds like 'airs'.
- **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; rush
- **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 the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?

## 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?

### What's with Cupid?

Helena discusses love in the context of the classical Roman character Cupid. In this tradition, Cupid is often portrayed as a mischievous, winged, and blindfolded child who shoots arrows at people to make them fall in love. These qualities help Helena make sense of unrequited love.

- If you were to personify love, what qualities would you give it?
- What would your personification of love look like?

## Explore the character

- Notice how Helena talks about Hermia versus how Helena talks about Demetrius. What does that tell you about their relationships?
- Helena focuses on Hermia's eyes, but only mentions Demetrius's "qualities". What do you think that means?
- 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?

## Challenge the words

Words change meaning over time. The word 'fair' originally meant beautiful. In England at the time Shakespeare was writing, lighter-coloured skin was associated with wealthy people who could avoid long hours working out in the sun and elements.

Because of its association with wealth, lighter-coloured skin became fashionable, and the word 'fair' evolved to mean light skin. In Shakespeare's plays and poems, it can sometimes be hard to tell which meaning of the word 'fair' is being evoked.

## Challenge the words, continued

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

- How do you feel about the word 'fair' in this speech?
- Would you prefer to use a different word? Professional theatre directors and actors cut and change Shakespeare's language all the time, and have done so for centuries. There is even evidence that Shakespeare's own acting company made changes to his texts.
- With that in mind, what changes might you like to make to the text? 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?



## Make it your own

### Performance

**Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it.** Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

**Ask someone to film your performance** so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

### Art

**Create** a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

### Music

**Express what the speech means to you through music.** Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've made.

### Creative Writing

**Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech.** How do you make sense of love and/or desire? Why do you think people fall in love with certain people? What happens when feelings aren't reciprocated? How do people bounce back and stay open to finding someone new?

**How would you respond to Helena?** Imagine Hermia, Demetrius, or one of Helena's parents could hear this speech. How do you imagine they would respond? How would you respond as yourself? What advice would you give? Write a response in the form of a poem, speech or story.