



What Happens in

A Midsummer Night's Dream

A comedy by William Shakespeare

We begin at the court of the great hero Theseus of Athens, a few days before Theseus is to marry Hippolyta, powerful warrior and ruler of the Amazons. Young Hermia and Lysander want to marry, but Hermia's parent, Egeus, wants Hermia to marry Demetrius instead. Athenian law supports Egeus and gives Hermia the right to make a choice: marry Demetrius, become a nun, or die. Hermia and Lysander decide to flee Athens, but not before telling Helena of their plans. Helena, who is desperately in love with Demetrius, shares this secret with Demetrius. Demetrius follows the fleeing couple, and Helena follows Demetrius, sending all four young lovers into the wood (the forest) outside of town.

In another part of Athens, some tradespeople prepare a play, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby*, in honour of Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. A carpenter named Quince has written the play, which will feature Bottom the weaver and Flute the bellows mender in the title roles. Snout the tinker, Starveling the tailor, and Snug the joiner also take part. The tradespeople decide to rehearse their play in the wood outside town so that their performance will be a surprise.

The wood outside Athens is no ordinary forest: it's the home of Oberon and Titania, rulers of the fairy realm, and all their fairy followers. The natural world is in turmoil because Oberon and Titania are fighting over a changeling child. To humiliate Titania and use magic to prevail, Oberon asks the mischievous fairy Puck to fetch a magical flower with the power to create an overpowering infatuation: a sleeping person will fall madly in love with the first creature they see when they wake up. Oberon decides to use this flower on Titania.

While waiting for Puck to return with the flower, Oberon witnesses a scene between Helena and Demetrius. Taking pity on Helena, Oberon tells Puck of the "sweet Athenian lady" who is "in love with a disdainful youth" and tells Puck to use some of the flower juice to make the youth fall in love with Helena. Oberon explains that Puck will know the youth by "Athenian garments". However, neither realizes that there are two Athenian couples in the wood. Puck puts the love juice into Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius' eyes, accidentally causing Lysander to fall in love with Helena.

Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snout, Starveling, and Snug arrive in the same grove for their rehearsal, and Puck sees them. Puck uses magic to give Bottom the head of an ass (a donkey), causing the others to flee in terror. Bottom decides to conquer fear by singing, and wakes Titania, who, because of the enchantment from the flower, becomes infatuated with Bottom at first sight.

As Oberon and Puck delight in this development, they realize their mistake with the young lovers. They put love juice into Demetrius' eyes, who then falls in love with Helena. However, now both Lysander and Demetrius love Helena, and no one loves Hermia. Demetrius and Lysander decide to fight over Helena, so Oberon instructs Puck to prevent the fight and confuse the lovers so that they all fall asleep. Puck releases Lysander from the spell.

Titania arrives with the now beloved, donkey-headed Bottom, and they fall asleep in each other's arms. Oberon takes pity on Titania and reverses the love spell. Puck returns Bottom to a human shape before leaving with Titania and Oberon.

Hippolyta, Theseus, and Egeus arrive in the wood for a hunting trip and find Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius asleep. The lovers wake up and try to explain themselves. Demetrius confesses love for Helena, so Theseus overrules Egeus, and the three couples return to Athens to get married.

Bottom wakes up and believes that it's all been the most wonderful dream before going off to find the other tradespeople. They perform their play as part of the wedding celebrations. Then Oberon, Titania, and the Fairies arrive with blessings, and Puck has the last word.



Questions for you to consider

- What sort of setting do you imagine for the play? Think about time, place, and stylistic qualities.
- Choose a character you find especially interesting. What part of their story do you want to explore? How do you imagine the character feels about the different events in the story?
- What did you find surprising about the events in the play? Which parts would you find most interesting to see on stage? Which events would you want to bring to life?

A note about our style

We've adopted two key approaches when describing the events of the play. First, we've eliminated as much of the gendered language as possible. We'd like everyone to have the freedom to identify with any character that interests them. Second, we've done our best to simply describe the events, without offering too much about how characters might be feeling. Again, we want to provide room for your interpretations.

To learn more about the characters in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, *Who's Who in A Midsummer Night's Dream*.