

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



A MIDSUMMER
NIGHT'S DREAM

"If you want to understand Shakespeare,
these guides are perfect"

RUPERT EVERETT

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Tom Bishop

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Connell Guide
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Shakespeare's*

A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Introduction

“Whatever this being of ours is, in its depth and complexity, we see only a little of it, and that little bit is too much for us, incomprehensible.”

Mark Doty, *Heaven’s Coast*

“We are lived by powers we pretend to understand: They arrange our loves.”

W.H. Auden, “In Memory of Ernst Toller”

What explains the special quality of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*? Samuel Johnson called the play “wild and fantastical”, noting how “all the parts in their various modes are well written and give the kind of pleasure which the author designed”. The 19th-century critic William Hazlitt wrote, in the play’s own imagery, of his “wandering in a grove by moonlight” through “a sweetness like odours thrown from beds of flowers”. For these critics, the variety of language, character and incident on offer in the *Dream* was particularly pleasant and happy, and suited what they saw as the overall bent of the play towards happiness. G. K. Chesterton responded to “a spirit that unites mankind” in “the mysticism of happiness” and of the play’s “pure poetry and intoxication of words”, “the amazing

artistic and moral beauty” of its design.

One can acknowledge all this, and yet also note how the brightness of that design is full of shadow. Indeed, “shadow” is an important word in the play; the very actors who present it are finally called “shadows”. If the play celebrates happiness, it also knows something sadder, not only that unhappiness is possible but that happiness itself may be maintained only by a fragile resolution, perhaps by mere good fortune. Happiness is a kind of gift, perhaps even a kind of grace. In this play, the gift is not withheld, but the play remains very much aware of how it might be, of what slight turn would produce a very different outcome, one not less true to its picture of human life, if less lucky. The end of the comedy banishes what it calls “the blots of Nature’s hand”, but it knows what and where they are, and that they can all too easily return. Their return, written out in full in other plays, is called tragedy.

THE CHARACTERS

ARISTOCRATS:

Theseus, Duke of Athens; about to be married to

Hippolyta, warrior-queen of the Amazons.

Egeus, an old Athenian noble, who wants

Hermia, his daughter, to marry

Demetrius, a young Athenian noble, rather than

Lysander, whom Hermia loves. Her friend,

Helena, another Athenian girl, loves Demetrius, who once loved her instead of Hermia.

CRAFTSMEN:

Peter Quince, a carpenter, has joined with

Nick Bottom, a weaver,

Tom Snout, a tinker,

Robin Starveling, a tailor,

Francis Flute, a bellows-mender, and

Snug, a joiner, to rehearse a play in honour of the impending Royal Wedding.

FAIRIES:

Oberon, King of the Fairies, attended by

Puck, also known as “Robin Goodfellow” and “Hobgoblin”, is feuding with

Titania, the Fairy Queen, whose fairy attendants include:

Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mustardseed and Moth.

A summary of the plot

Act One

Theseus, Duke of Athens, has defeated in battle Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, a nation of warrior women, and the pair are to be married. They must wait for the new moon for the ceremony to take place. Interrupting the preparations, Egeus, a nobleman, brings a complaint against his daughter, Hermia, for refusing to marry Demetrius, his chosen spouse, and instead preferring Lysander. Egeus demands that Hermia be forced to marry Demetrius or else executed. Theseus confirms this penalty, adding the option of lifelong celibacy as a nun, and gives Hermia until the new moon to decide. Left alone, Lysander and Hermia decide to elope to his aunt’s house, beyond Athenian jurisdiction. They make arrangements to meet in the wood outside the city that night, and tell their plan to Hermia’s close friend, Helena, unrequited in her own love for Demetrius, to reassure her that the path to her love will now be clear. Helena, pitifully lamenting her lovelorn state, decides to betray their plan to Demetrius.

Meanwhile, a group of local craftsmen led by Peter Quince is planning a play to celebrate the Royal Wedding. They meet to distribute parts, and Nick Bottom, a weaver, displays his talents as an actor. They plan to rehearse secretly at night in the wood.

Act Two

Night. Puck, the famous Hobgoblin, meets some fairies in the wood and explains to them that a great quarrel has erupted between King Oberon and Queen Titania of Fairyland over possession of a boy Titania has stolen from an Indian King in memory of the boy's dead mother. In consequence of their quarrel, the natural order of the seasons has gone awry. Titania and Oberon meet; she refuses to relinquish the boy, and leaves. In vengeful rage, Oberon commands Puck to fetch a magical flower whose juice laid on the eyes will cause a sleeper to fall in love with the first creature seen on waking. With this he plans to force Titania to give up her Indian boy. While Puck is on his errand, Oberon witnesses Helena in the wood pleading for love with Demetrius, who rejects her. Oberon decides to help Helena and gives Puck some of the flower with instructions to use it on Demetrius.

Titania is sung asleep in the forest by her fairies, and Oberon secretly anoints her eyes with the magical flower.

Lysander and Hermia, tired and lost in the wood, go to sleep until day. Puck finds them and, mistaking Lysander for Demetrius, anoints his eyes with the flower. When Helena appears and awakens him, he immediately falls in love with and woos her. Convinced he is making fun of her, Helena leaves, and Lysander follows. Hermia wakes from a nightmare to find Lysander gone and

leaves to find him, fearing the worst.

Act Three

Quince, Bottom and company meet to rehearse their play, a love tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe. They dispute points of staging, but are confounded and scatter when Bottom reappears with the head of an ass, transformed by mischievous Puck. Undaunted, Bottom sings a song, waking Titania, who falls in love with him and takes him away.

Oberon is delighted to hear of Titania's new love, but perturbed to observe Hermia accusing Demetrius of killing Lysander. When Hermia leaves and Demetrius falls asleep, Oberon sends Puck to fetch Helena and anoints Demetrius's eyes. Helena appears, followed by Lysander, and Demetrius awakes to fall in love with her. Lysander and Demetrius dispute who has more claim on Helena, and the three are joined by Hermia, who accuses Helena of stealing Lysander's love. Helena accuses all three of making fun of her, and is especially bitter at Hermia for betraying her friendship. Demetrius and Lysander withdraw to duel and the women part in anger. Puck rounds up all four exhausted lovers and they fall asleep. Oberon disenchant's Lysander, leaving Demetrius in love with Helena.

Act Four

Titania entertains Bottom in her bower, then falls

asleep with him. Oberon appears and releases her from the spell, since she has now given him the Indian boy. Awaking, she is disgusted with Bottom and leaves with Oberon, requesting explanations.

Theseus and Hippolyta, out hunting, stumble upon the four lovers and wake them. The couples are amazed at the events of the night, and the rearrangement of Demetrius's affections. They consider it a wondrous dream. Theseus, noting the happy outcome, over-rules Egeus's objections so that all three couples can marry together.

Bottom awakes and recalls his night with Titania as "a most rare dream". He returns to his fellow actors, who prepare for their performance before the Duke.

Act Five

Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the lovers' strange story, then all three couples watch and comment on the dreadful performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe", which ends in a country dance. All adjourn to bed, and the Fairy King and Queen lead the fairies in a ceremony of blessing for the newly married couples, promising happiness and perfect children. Puck then sweeps the floor and bids farewell to the audience.

What is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about?

All Shakespeare's comedies revolve around love, as did those of his contemporaries. Shakespeare would have been familiar with the Latin comedies of Plautus and Terence, Roman playwrights of the second century BC, as these were standard books for boys at the grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon we are fairly sure he attended. These plays usually feature young lovers, often opposed by old authority, who want to get married, and their plots consist of complicating and then undoing the obstacles they face. Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, tends to follow this pattern.

What is striking about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the extent to which love, as well as driving the plot, is a subject of discussion. The characters' experience of love, their journey into or out of it, its effect on their image of themselves and others – all these are central concerns. As Frank Kermode says, the play's "patterns of sight and blindness, wood and city, phantasma and vision, grow into a large and complex statement... of love, vulgar and celestial". Love may not quite make the world go round – but in this play it is crucial to happiness, social order, and even (because the fraying of love between the fairy rulers has disrupted the seasons) the maintenance of good weather.

When, in this first scene, Lysander and Hermia