A Midsummer Night's Dream

VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL 2026

WHAT'S INSIDE

The Acting Company 3

A Midsummer Night's Dream 4

A Tale of Transformation? 5-6

Master of the Mashup:
Shakespeare and His *Midsummer* Sources 7-8

Who Was Shakespeare and Why Should I Care? 9-10

Shakespeare's England: The Elizabethan Age 11-12

The Theater Experience:
Shakespeare's Day and Today 13

For Better or Verse 14-15

Resources 16

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The Acting Company

The New York-based, Tony Award-winning Acting Company is the only professional theater dedicated to the development of young actors. The Company's performers are recent college graduates, who hone their craft performing world-class theater across the United States. The Company is devoted to bringing high-quality theater and drama education to hundreds of American communities, from small towns to major cities.

The Company has been focused on supporting recent drama graduates since its earliest days. It was founded in 1972 by John Houseman and Margot Harley with the first graduating class of the Drama Division of The Juilliard School. Since then, The Acting Company has launched the careers of some 400 actors, including Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone, Mary Lou Rosato, Keith David, Rainn Wilson, Lorraine Toussaint, Frances Conroy, Harriet Harris, Lisa Banes, Jeffrey Wright, Hamish Linklater, Jesse L. Martin, Roslyn Ruff, Jimonn Cole, and Kelley Curran, among many others.

The Acting Company puts on both classic plays, like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and new plays, like *Native Son* by Nambi E. Kelley. In 2019, their production of Native Son directed by Seret Scott won the Audelco Award for Best Play!

What Do You Think?

A lot of work goes into putting on a play or a concert. There are many jobs responsible for different elements of the performance, from lighting, sets, and costumes, to organizing tickets and marketing for the show. Do a little research and see if any of these careers sound interesting to you! If they do, ask your teacher to help connect you with a local arts organization. (PS: It could be Virginia Arts Festival!)

Source: Adapted from https://theactingcompany.org

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Type: Comedy

First Performance: Circa 1595–1596

First Published: 1600

Back in the (Elizabethan England) day, "midsummer madness" was another way to say "a temporary lapse into craziness," and A Midsummer Night's Dream is most definitely jam-packed with that. The play is Shakespeare's most performed comedy. Let's get into the story:

Theseus, the duke of Athens, is getting ready for his wedding to Hippolyta of the Amazons when Egeus, a local nobleman, asks for help with his defiant daughter, Hermia. Egeus wants his daughter to marry Demetrius; having a mind of her own, Hermia wishes to marry Lysander. Unfortunately, Athenian law insists she marry the man her father chooses—or die. Theseus offers another option: Hermia could become a nun. Faced with these choices, Hermia and her boyfriend Lysander decide to meet in the woods to run away from Athens together, but before they do, they let Helena, Hermia's best friend, in on their plans. Helena's the one who likes Demetrius, and she shares the couple's secret with him. Demetrius, who had previously dated Helena before falling for Hermia, follows Lysander and Hermia into the woods, with lovesick Helena obsessively trailing behind.

Meanwhile, several of the city's working class have decided to perform a play on the occasion of the nobles' wedding (a play within our play). Peter Quince, a carpenter, puts together a cast of other craftsmen to perform, including the braggadocious weaver Nick Bottom as the lead actor. They plan to meet in the woods to rehearse on the same night as the lovers' elopement.

In the woods, Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, are at odds because she refuses to hand over to her husband a child left in her care. Furious and jealous, Oberon has his attendant Puck put a spell on Titania with a magic flower; when she wakes up from sleep, she'll fall in love with whatever creature she sees first. And if Puck could use the same flower to solve the little problem of Helena's unrequited feelings for Demetrius...

Except, Puck gets the wrong Athenian young man—Lysander. Oberon "fixes" his mistake by putting the spell on his intended target, Demetrius. Now both Lysander and Demetrius are in love with Helena, setting off a nasty quarrel between both men and women.

When the craftsmen meet to rehearse, the plucky fairy Puck replaces Bottom's head with a donkey's—making him a literal "ass". The other craftsmen are so freaked out that they flee, leaving Bottom on his own in the forest. The fairy queen Titania wakes up and first catches sight of Bottom, so thanks to the magic flower, she falls madly in love with him, donkey face and all.

Finally, Oberon puts the relationships in order, sort of: Hermia + Lysander and Helena + Demetrius (who now returns her feelings). Bottom is magically restored to his regular self. When everyone wakes up in the morning, Theseus has a change of heart and allows Hermia to choose Lysander as her husband, and the two young couples return to Athens to get married alongside the duke and his bride. Once Oberon takes the child from Titania, she is released from her love spell too.

At the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta (and Hermia + Lysander and Helena + Demetrius), Bottom and his crew of craftsmen get to perform their (comedically terrible) play, and the fairies bless the happy couples.

Wrapping up the play, a solo Puck addresses the audience directly, suggesting that if the characters have offended us, we should think of the whole story as no more real than a dream...

What Do You Think?

We've all had dreams in which some pretty weird stuff has happened. We've had scary nightmares that startle us from sleep, and happy dreams that leave us in a terrific mood when we wake up. Think about all the things that happen in the play connected to dreams, sleep, or waking from sleep, and how they affect the characters. The play's title includes the word dream. If the comedy is indeed a dream, whose dream is it? Bottom's? Titania's? Puck's? The lovers'? The audience's? How do you know? Write or discuss your answer.

A Tale of Transformation?

A Midsummer Night's Dream is full of transformations. Some are obvious, even amusing: Bottom goes through some pretty "ass-inine" changes, and similar fairy magic does a number on other characters too. Some changes are more subtle, though, leading to a bit of personal enlightenment. What does lovesick Helena learn about how it feels to be the object of obsessive love? How about idealistic Lysander and Hermia in search of "happily ever after"? What about the law-spouting Theseus? Create an outline or chart to show each character's transformation over the course of the play.

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

It can be a challenge keeping track of all the love-crazed, fairy-altered folks in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here's a handy guide to the key characters.

UPPER CRUST (ROYALS AND LOVERS)

Theseus Duke of Athens, getting ready to marry Hippolyta

Hippolyta Queen of the Amazons and Theseus's fiancée

Egeus Hermia's father, who wants her to marry Demetrius

Hermia Egeus's daughter, who's in love with Lysander, not Demetrius

Lysander Young man Hermia wishes to marry

Demetrius Young man Egeus wants Hermia to marry, romanced Helena before falling for Hermia

Helena Hermia's best friend who's in love with Demetrius

CRAFTSMEN (MECHANICALS)

Peter Quince Carpenter, director of play to be performed at Theseus's wedding

Nick Bottom Weaver, lands the lead role in the wedding play

Francis Flute Bellows mender, cast as the girl character in the wedding play

William Blake, Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing, c. 1786, Tate, London, UK. www.dailyartmagazine.com

Edwin Austin Abbey, Helena: "Stay, though thou kill me, sweet Demetrius," 1893, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, USA. www.dailyartmagazine.com

Tom Snout Tinker who repairs pots and pans

Snug Furniture builder

Starveling Tailor

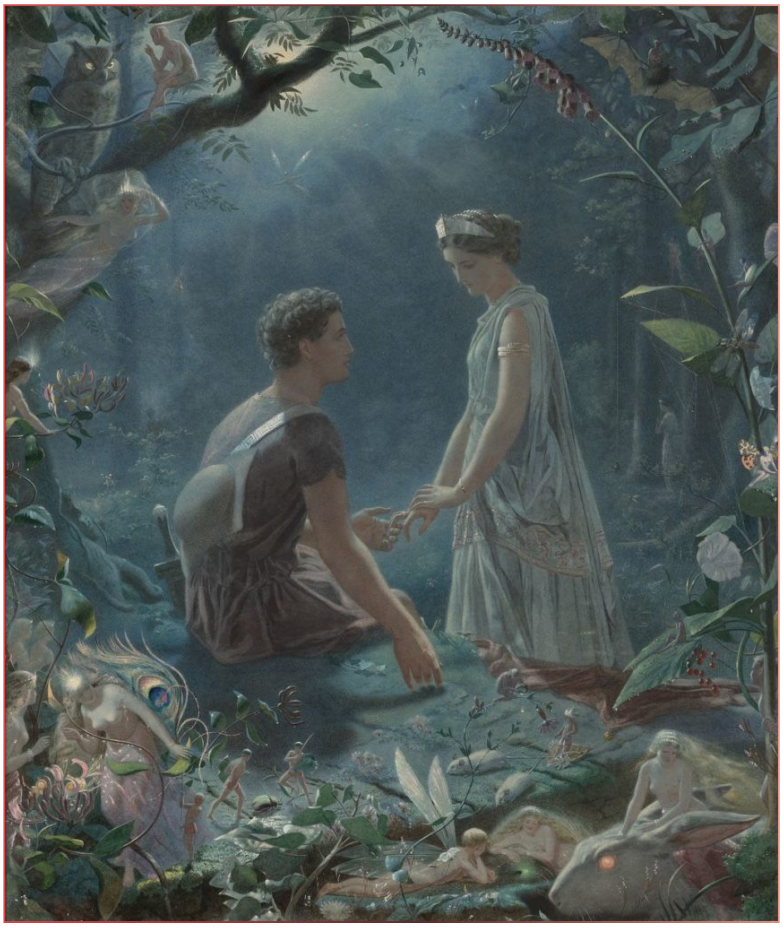
FAIRIES

Oberon King of the fairies, miffed at Titania, his wife, whom he thinks is giving more attention to a changeling child than to him

Titania Queen of the fairies, married to Oberon, looking after a boy left in her care

Puck Oberon's jokester sidekick, an impish, rowdy sprite

Child A changeling boy being taken care of by Titania (In English folklore, a "changeling" is a child secretly swapped for another by fairies in the night.)



John Simmons, Hermia and Lysander, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1861.
www.dailyartmagazine.com

Research & Reflect

What's in a name? The monikers that writers choose for their characters often add extra meaning, and can even foreshadow plot elements. Take *The Hunger Games*' bow-wielding Katniss Everdeen, for example; katniss is a plant in the genus *Sagittaria*, which in Latin means "related to arrows."

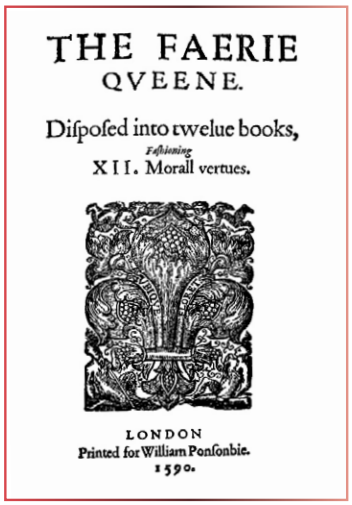
Choose a few characters from the play and research the origin of their name. Did Shakespeare borrow the name from history, mythology, or another source? Did he invent the name to suit the character? What do you think Shakespeare might have been trying to convey to the audience by choosing that character's name? Share your thoughts in an essay or presentation.

Photos from

Master of the Mashup: Shakespeare and His *Midsummer* Sources

Like many great creatives—writers, painters, musicians, filmmakers—Shakespeare was fond of borrowing bits and pieces from others' works to help build out his own. He didn't do this in a shifty way, like blatantly plagiarizing somebody else's stuff; rather, he used parts of preexisting stories, fiction and nonfiction, as inspiration, homage, and a means to better reach his audience. Skillfully blending and mixing his sources to create something both familiar and uniquely brand new, Shakespeare was a true master of the literary mashup.

Experts believe that for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare borrowed from a variety of sources created in various time periods, including his own. He drew on the work of Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, whose masterful epic poem The Faerie Queene is loaded with magical beings and locations, and whose *Epithalamion*, a wedding-day ode to the poet's bride, is a celebration of marriage. Both works were published in the 1590s, when Shakespeare was acting and writing in London.


THE FAERIE
QVEENE.

Diſpoſed into twelue books,
Fashioning
XII. Morall vertues.

LONDON
Printed for William Ponſonbie.
1590.

The Faerie Queene, by Edmund Spenser (1552 – 1599).

Tapestry showing two scenes from *Der Busant*, a Medieval poem, 1480–90

Reaching back to the 1400s, Shakespeare looked to the German poem *Der Busant*, about eloping lovers getting lost in a forest. Moving further back in time, to the 1300s, the playwright drew on the chivalric romance "The Knight's Tale," part of Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval epic *The Canterbury Tales*. That story features two men fighting over a woman, which forces Theseus—in Greek mythology, the hero-king of Athens; in "The Knight's Tale," the Duke of Athens—to intervene (Hippolyta appears in "The Knight's Tale" as well).

Thisbe (The Listener), by John William Waterhouse (1849–1917).

Anything sounding familiar?
Finally, you know that play-within-the play the Craftsmen put on in *Midsummer*? It tells a story from Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—likely written around 8 CE! In that tale, Pyramus and Thisbe are two Babylonian lovers prevented by their feuding parents from marrying. They whisper their love to each other through a crack in the wall adjoining their homes. The lovers arrange to meet secretly, but when Thisbe arrives, she's scared off by a lioness, the animal's mouth bloody from a recent kill. When Pyramus shows up, he finds remnants of Thisbe's veil, which fell from her head as she fled and which the lioness shredded, leaving the bloodstained bits. Thinking his true love dead, Pyramus falls on his sword; Thisbe returns, finds the lifeless Pyramus, and stabs herself with the same sword.

If you're thinking you might have heard that story somewhere before, you're right. Shakespeare used it as inspiration for another of his well-known plays, *Romeo and Juliet*.

What Do You Think?

Why would a writer, artist, musician, or filmmaker borrow from other creative works? How would it benefit the creator of the new work? That work's audience?

Try This!

Beyond Shakespeare, can you think of a creative work—like a book, song, TV show, or film—that borrows from or reinterprets another work? Make a chart, collage, or other visual representation to share with your class that compares and contrasts the new work and the source(s) it draws from. What's similar? What's different? Which do you prefer and why? Try to think of a new original work, not a 1:1 remake or song cover. What are its inspirations?

Who Was Shakespeare and Why Should I Care?

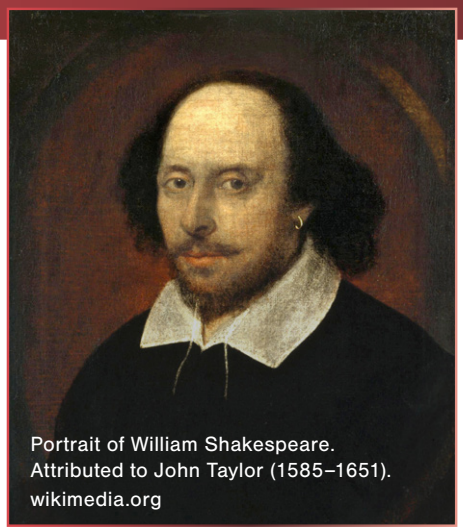
Though he's considered one of the greatest and most influential writers of all time, William Shakespeare remains largely a man of mystery. The scant details of his life come from his works, court and church records, and accounts from his peers. Scholars and historians have filled in the blanks with their best educated guesses.

Take Shakespeare's birth date. There is no definitive record of his birth, only his baptism, which occurred on April 26, 1564, in the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon, one hundred miles outside of London. Since the tradition of that time was to baptize a newborn three days after birth, it's assumed that Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564.

We do know that William was the eldest surviving child of John and Mary Shakespeare. He had seven brothers and sisters; only four survived early childhood. William's father was a glove maker and businessman, and his mother came from an affluent farming family.

William probably attended the King's New School, the "grammar school" that educated the boys of Stratford. Although the school's records haven't survived, since his father was prominent in town and he certainly knew the Latin works that were on the curriculum, historians tend to think he went there. At the King's New School, he would have received an education rooted in the classics: up to ten hours a day studying grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—most of it in Latin!

Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.
shakespeare.org.uk



Portrait of William Shakespeare.
Attributed to John Taylor (1585–1651).
wikimedia.org

In 1582, when William was eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six at the time. She was the daughter of a sheep farmer. Anne was already pregnant by the time they got married in church; this was fairly typical for the time period, in which many couples got together after a hand-fasting ceremony prior to their church wedding. Together, the couple had three children, an eldest daughter, Susanna, and twins Judith and Hamnet. Hamnet, William's only son, died in 1596 when he was just eleven. Anne spent the rest of her life in Stratford with the family, but Shakespeare eventually came to live and work primarily in London, England's hub of theater and culture.
There is no conclusive documentation of William Shakespeare's whereabouts between 1585 and 1592, a period commonly called Shakespeare's "lost years." We do know that by 1592 he was working in London as an actor and a playwright—because another playwright, Robert Greene, insulted him! In that year, Greene, a university-educated dramatist, sneeringly wrote about an actor who "supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you" and who thought himself "the only Shake-scene in a country".

By 1594 Shakespeare was acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a performance troupe. The company was later renamed the King's Men, after King James I took the throne upon Queen Elizabeth I's death in 1603. Until 1642, when the religious Puritans closed the theaters, the King's Men troupe was a favorite with both royalty and the public.

Shakespeare's acting company performed at the Globe Theatre, built by the troupe around 1599. Evidence suggests that the venue was a polygonal, three-story, open-air amphitheater that could accommodate an audience of three thousand. From 1608 the King's Men performed at the Globe during the summer months and at Blackfriars, an indoor theater the troupe acquired, in the winter.

Inside the Globe Theatre.
cnn.com

Shakespeare's plays were in such demand that many were published and sold in "penny-copies" to his more literate fans. These copies were sold unbound as loose stacks of paper and are called quartos by historians, since the large sheets of paper in use at the time were folded 4 times to make the small individual pages. At first, the quartos simply referred to plays acted by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. But as Shakespeare's fame grew, his name appeared on their title pages as an additional advertisement. Shakespeare retired from the King's Men in 1611 at age forty-seven and returned to Stratford. He died on April 23, 1616.

In his lifetime, William Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays, 154 sonnets, and two narrative poems, among other works. His works include the first written records of almost 600 words in the English language—probably a mix of Shakespeare's own creative inventions as well as new "slang" in use at the time period. Today, Shakespeare's plays are read, studied, performed, and enjoyed all over the world. As playwright and poet Ben Jonson, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, once wrote, "He was not of an age, but for all time."

Those new to Shakespeare may wonder what all the fuss is about. Sure, he's one of the world's most popular playwrights and poets, but what makes him so special?

Perhaps the most important reason Shakespeare is revered is the way he makes us think about life's big-picture issues, things most people grapple with sooner or later. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the playwright asks us to ponder the nature of romantic love and how it might transform us. Do the "true" lovers, Hermia and Lysander, have any real say in their future together without the intervention of fairy magic? Does love cloud our judgment and make us do crazy things, such as fall for a literal "ass," like Titania, or act vengefully, like Oberon? As Lysander says to Hermia, "The course of true love never did run smooth."

Other reasons Shakespeare remains timeless include his remarkable storytelling—his works still inspire modern authors, playwrights, filmmakers, dancers, and artists—his complex and dimensional characters, who are fun to read and challenging for actors to play, and his ability to turn an elegant or colorful phrase. Many common phrases in the English language first appeared in Shakespeare's works: *for goodness' sake*, *the short and long of it*, *in a pickle*, *heart of gold*, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream, fancy-free*.

Shakespeare's England: The Elizabethan Age

Elizabeth I of England, the Armada Portrait. wikimedia.org

Shakespeare lived most of his life during one of the most remarkable periods in English history, the Elizabethan Age. Queen Elizabeth I ascended to England's throne in 1558, six years before Shakespeare was born. Her reign until 1603 was characterized by a flourishing of art and architecture as well as exploration and privateering in the Americas. Many in England grew wealthier, though for the poorest, living conditions declined. Elizabeth was a canny leader who sought to expand England's power overseas, build her own glorious reputation, and avoid or otherwise quell religious conflict at home. Because of Elizabeth's successes, her reign is often called a Golden Age. She left behind a complicated legacy. Let's explore it together...

- Elizabeth expanded England's small navy into a force to be reckoned with. In 1588, the Queen's ships famously defeated the invading Spanish Armada.

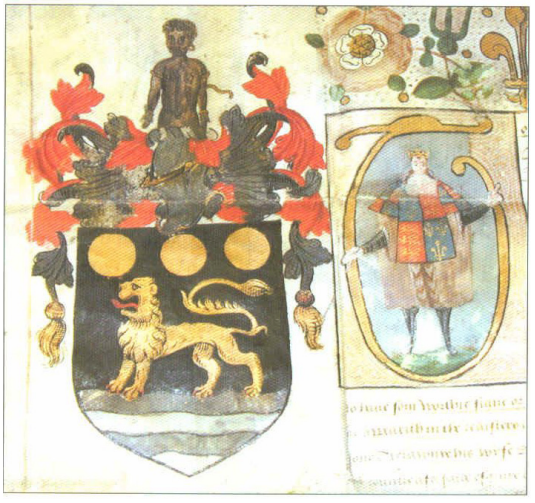
- Elizabeth boosted England's wealth and influence by sponsoring privateers like Sir Francis Drake to seize riches from Spanish ships and explore the Americas, setting the stage for England's later colonial projects. Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the explorers of Elizabeth's court, named North American territory "Virginia" in honor of Elizabeth ("the Virgin Queen") in hopes of claiming it for England.

- Elizabeth supported privateer John Hawkins' raids in West Africa, in which he captured hundreds of people and sold them across the Atlantic to Spanish colonies. Hawkins' raids marked the beginning of England's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

- Elizabeth struggled to navigate religious divisions. She maintained the Protestant Church of England created by her father, Henry VIII, but tried to compromise regarding decorations, ceremony, and prayers to make it appeal to a majority of her subjects. However, Catholics were not allowed to practice their faith openly, and strict Protestants (called Puritans) disliked the church's elaborate ceremony and hierarchy. After facing challenges to her rule, Elizabeth cracked down on Catholicism. In Ireland, her troops brutally suppressed Catholic rebellions.

- Elizabeth was a patron of the arts, and literature and theater flourished during her reign. Aside from Shakespeare's works, literary masterpieces of the period include Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. During the Elizabethan era, dedicated theaters were built in England for the first time, and theatergoing became a weekly event for many Londoners.

Sir Walter Raleigh, National Portrait Gallery, London. wikimedia.org



John Hawkins' coat of arms, showing an enslaved African man. wikimedia.org

After Elizabeth

Elizabeth's successor upon her death in 1603 was King James I, who also had a great love for the literary arts, especially drama. It was at his decree that Shakespeare's acting company, Lord Chamberlain's Men, was rechristened the King's Men. King James also famously commissioned a new scholarly English translation of the Bible, which would be the standard, authoritative Bible for the Church of England (various other English translations were floating around at the time). This is the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible still frequently in use today.

THE
MERRY VVIVES
OF VVINSOR.

Actus primus, Scena prima.

Enter Iustice Shallow, Slender, Sir Hugh Euans, Master Page, Falstaffe, Bardolph, Nym, Pistoll, Anne Page, Mistresse Ford, Mistresse Page, Simple.

Shallow.

Sir *Hugh*, perswade me not: I will make a Star-Chamber matter of it, if he were twenty Sir *Iohn Falstaffes*, hee shall not abuse *Robert Shallow* Esquire.

Slen. In the County of *Glocester*, Iustice of Peace and Coram.

Shal. I (Cosen *Slender*) and *Custalorum*.

Slen. I, and *Ratolorum* too; and a Gentleman borne (Master Parson) who writes himselfe *Armigero*, in any Bill, Warrant, Quittance, or Obligation, *Armigero*.

Shal. I that I doe, and haue done any time these three hundred yeeres.

Slen. All his successors (gone before him) hath don't; and all his Ancestors (that come after him) may: they may giue the dozen white Luces in their Coate.

A 2 *Shal.*

Cast list for Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* from the late 1600s, showing women in roles, eg. Mistress Page played by Mrs. Cory.

King James's big-spending lifestyle, taxation policy, and desire to not share political authority with Parliament (increasingly controlled by Puritans) caused political tensions to grow. Relations between the monarchy and Parliament worsened when Charles I, King James' son, ascended to the throne upon his father's death in 1628. As Charles I continued to act against Parliament's wishes, brutal civil conflict broke out across England, Scotland, and Ireland between the King's supporters, Parliament's supporters, Irish Catholics, and Scottish Presbyterians. In 1649, Charles I was executed by the Puritan-led Parliament.

Among the many reforms enacted by Puritans at the height of the civil war was the closing of all theaters (viewed as immoral) in 1642. In 1660 Charles I's son was restored to the throne of England. King Charles II allowed theaters to reopen, ushering in a new era of theatrical revival. But the curtain had fallen on the unique and vibrant time period of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Learn more about the Elizabethan era's ups and downs here at BBC Bitesize: https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zsysn9q#zvg3vwx

Did You Know?

In poetry, the Spenserian stanza (invented by Edmund Spenser), blank verse (used in Shakespeare's plays after having been popularized by Christopher Marlowe), and the Shakespearean sonnet (invented a few decades earlier, but made famous by Shakespeare) all have roots in the Elizabethan era.

During the Elizabethan era, young men played all the women's roles in theatrical plays (though noblewomen could act out mythological or symbolic roles in fancy court entertainments). After the 1660 Restoration of Charles II, women began acting onstage before the English theatergoing public.

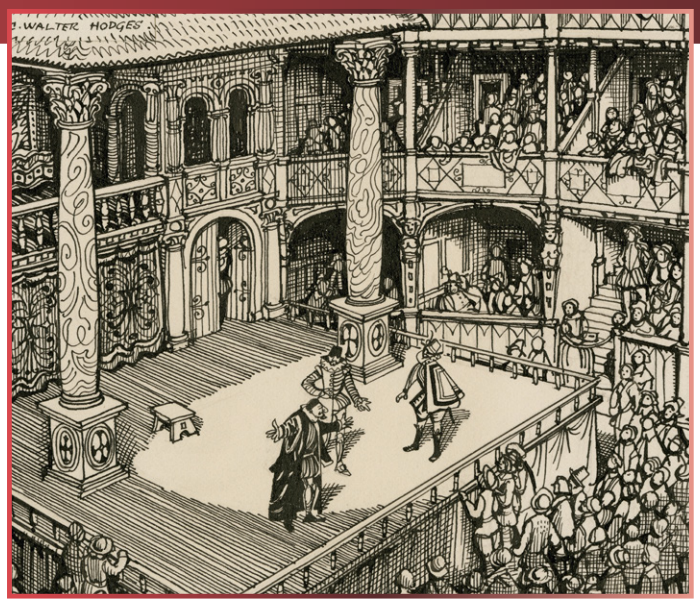
The Theater Experience: Shakespeare's Day and Today

In Shakespeare's day, attending a play was an exciting community event, like a festive party. While waiting for the play to begin—and even during the show—spectators drank wine or ale and snacked on a variety of foods. Modern-day excavations at the sites of Shakespearean playhouses have unearthed bottles, spoons, remnants of fruits and nuts, small animal bones like those of chicken, and loads and loads of oyster shells, a favorite of Elizabethan theatergoers.

In the 1500s and 1600s, performances were held in the middle of the afternoon, either outdoors under the afternoon sun or indoors by candlelight. The actors could see the audience, the audience could see the actors, and the members of the audience could see each other.

In Elizabethan times, there wasn't such a pronounced division between the actors and the audience as there is today. The theaters were small, and audience members sat close to the stage. In theaters like the Globe, the cheapest tickets let you stand around the stage in the "pit"; since this was at ground level, these playgoers were called "groundlings." Well-paying audience members could sit on the stage itself. They often changed seats, mingled, and walked in and out of the venue, much like at a modern sporting event. But they always knew what was going on in the play and didn't want to miss the best part—the swordfight, the kiss, the bawdy joke, or that new word Shakespeare had invented!

Actors performing above the "groundlings" at a reconstructed theater, Globe Archive.



C. Walter Hodge's rendition of an Elizabethan stage, wikimedia.org

In Shakespeare's age, his plays were intended to be seen and listened to at the theater. It's a testament to Shakespeare's popularity that his plays were published in writing at all. Compared to today, Elizabethans and Elizabethan culture relied much more on spoken language than reading and writing. As you'll see, the experience of attending a play is very different to reading it—emotions, humor, and appeals to the audience really come to life. Like reading, though, you'll use your imagination to experience the story. Shakespeare's plays were performed with little scenery and special effects. Costumes were used and reused for all places and periods, even if they didn't fit a play's exotic or historical setting. Actors played multiple roles, including young men playing all the women's parts. Shakespeare's vivid stories were—and are—incredibly effective within these limitations. Rather than trying to create a flawless illusion of reality, his plays often wittily embrace being a theatrical performance (like with Puck's fourth-wall-breaking remarks to the theater's audience and the hilarious play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Wherever you sit at the performance, let the action of the play draw you in. Do be considerate, however, of others who are also trying to see and hear the show. Part of your role as an audience member is to make sure that attending the play is enjoyable for everyone.

Source: Adapted from American Shakespeare Center, www.americanshakespearecenter.com, with information from "Shakespeare's Theater," Folger Shakespeare Library, https://www.folger.edu/shakespeares-theater, and "Globe Theatre Food," The Globe Theatre, http://www.bardstage.org/globe-theatre-food.htm.

For Better or Verse

Watercolor by John Simmons (1873). wikimedia.org

Does reading *A Midsummers Night's Dream* feel like reading one super-long poem? That's because Shakespeare—nicknamed the Bard, another word for poet—included loads of verse in his plays. Verse is language with a set rhythm. Why would Shakespeare do that? Two main reasons: tradition and memorization. Since the beginning of theater, plays typically were written in verse, and verse is easier to memorize than prose—kind of like how a song lyric or rap rhyme can get stuck in your mind. Shakespeare generally used verse, a formal way of speaking, for the dialogue of nobility and other important people.

Shakespeare used a verse form called blank verse. While blank verse doesn't rhyme, each line does have an internal rhythm, like a heartbeat. That rhythm of blank verse is called **iambic pentameter**. Sounds fancy, but it's pretty easy to understand. Let's break that name down. An **iamb** is one short, unstressed syllable followed by one long, stressed syllable. It's that heartbeat rhythm: da DUM, da DUM, da DUM (or i AM, i AM, i AM, for an easy way to remember). **Penta** means five, like the number of sides on a pentagon. And meter means a rhythmic pattern. So iambic pentameter is a rhythmic pattern made up of five iambs—or heartbeats, or da DUMs (or i AMs)—per line.

Here is one of Puck's lines from act 3, scene 2:

my **MIS**- | tress **WITH** | a **MON**- | ster **IS** | in **LOVE**

Hear the five heartbeats, the five da DUMs (i AMs)? That's iambic pentameter.

But ol' Shakespeare liked to mix it up; he was one of the first playwrights to use both verse and prose—language without a set rhythm or structure—when it suited him. Prose is the form typically used by the servants and common citizens in Shakespeare's works; it's closer to informal, everyday language, speech that Shakespeare's audiences used themselves and would easily recognize. So in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom and his fellow Craftsmen speak most of the prose.

Speaking of mixing it up, in *Midsummer* Shakespeare throws in with his iambs another type of two-syllable verse pattern, the trochee (pronounced TRO-key). Like an iamb, a trochee is a type of poetic foot, or basic unit of a poem's meter. Its pattern of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable is the exact opposite of an iamb: DA dum (or TRO key). Compared to an iamb, this felt surprisingly unnatural to English-language speakers in Shakespeare's day, so the Bard often used trochees for his supernatural characters, like fairies and witches and ghosts.

In *Midsummer*, several of Puck's speeches are in trochaic tetrameter—a line of poetry containing four (tetra in Greek) trochaic feet. For example, from the epilogue, act 5:

IF we | **SHA** dows | **HAVE** of- | **FEN** ded

THINK but | **THIS** and | **ALL** is | **MEN** ded

But wait—Shakespeare had yet another trick up his sleeve. Sometimes he'd hang an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line. That's called a **feminine ending**, and it throws off the rhythm of the verse just a bit. Shakespeare used it to suggest a character feeling thrown off or unsettled, like Hermia in act 3, scene 2, after Lysander left her alone in the woods:

since **NIGHT** | you **LOVED** | me **YET** | since **NIGHT** | you **LEFT** | me

Wow, Shakespeare sure used every poetic tool he could to get his meanings across, right?

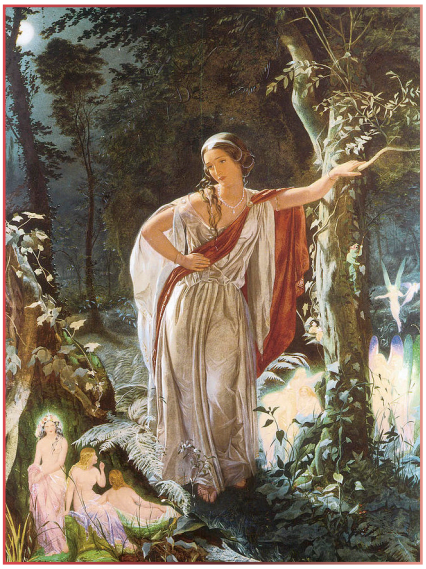
What Do You Think?

Does your language change depending on whom you're speaking to or what you're speaking about? Why?

Rhyme and Reason?

Most of Shakespeare's plays are written in blank verse, but he still liked to rhyme—especially to call the audience's attention to something. For *Midsummer*, he busted out the rhymes in a big way, with almost half the play written in rhyming verse (for one example, see Puck's line above)! Why do you think he made that choice? How might rhyming verse affect an audience? Does it contribute to a sense of magic? If so, how?

19th century depiction of Lysander, Hermia, and Puck by Paul Konewka. folger.edu



Hermia and the Fairies by John Simmons (1861). dailyartmagazine.com

Try This

Got skills? Try your hand at writing in Shakespearean verse. Pen a few lines in iambic pentameter, then mix it up by tossing in a few trochees, rhymes, and maybe even a feminine ending. How do the trochees, rhymes, and feminine ending change the meaning, mood, or effect of what you've written?

Source: Adapted from A Midsummer Night's Dream Study Guide, Classic Stage Company, https://www.classicstage.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/studyguide-Midsummer.pdf

Resources

Absolute Shakespeare

www.absoluteshakespeare.com

Extensive online resource for Shakespeare's plays, sonnets, poems, quotes, biography, and Globe Theatre information.

Complete Works of William Shakespeare

http://shakespeare.mit.edu

MIT's online collection of free, full-text versions of Shakespeare's plays and poetry.

Folger Shakespeare Library

www.folger.edu

The Folger is a world-renowned research center devoted to Shakespeare and his time. Its online teaching resources include Shakespeare lesson plans and other classroom materials.

No Fear Shakespeare

www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare

No Fear Shakespeare puts the Bard's language side-by-side with a modern English translation—the kind of English people actually speak today.

Shakespeare Online

www.shakespeare-online.com

Shakespeare Online explores Shakespeare's works through history and literary analysis for students, teachers, and Shakespeare enthusiasts.

Elizabethan Drama

http://elizabethandrama.org

Website exploring Elizabethan drama and plays from other playwrights of the period as well as Shakespeare, with free annotated copies for reading and research. Their Shakespeare's Words project includes a list of all the words confirmed to have first appeared in writing in Shakespeare's works: http://elizabethandrama.org/shakespeare-invented-words-project/master-list-invented-words

Shakespeare Documented

https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/

This project has compiled all kinds of historical documents related to Shakespeare and his life. View the original documents together with descriptions and transcriptions.

BBC Bitesize: Elizabethan Era

https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zsysn9q#zvg3vwx

Get a brief overview of major developments in the Elizabethan era—and its legacy as a Golden Age (or not?) in English history.

Virginia Standards of Learning

Theater Arts: 6.3-6; 7.3-6; 8.3-6; TI.3-4, 6; TII.3-4, 6; TIII.3-4, 6; TIV.3-4, 6; TT.3-4

English: 6.RV.1; 6.RL.1-3; 7.RV.1; 7.RL.1-3; 8.RV.1; 8.RL.1-3; 9.RV.1; 9.RL.1-3; 10.RV.1; 10.RL.1-3; 11.RV.1; 11.RL.1-3; 12.RV.1; 12.RL.1-3

History and Social Science: Skills WHII

Feedback Form

We need your feedback to make our Education Programs even better! Please take a moment to complete this form and either return it to the Virginia Arts Festival office at 440 Bank Street, Norfolk, VA 23510, fax it to (757) 605-3080, or e-mail your answers to education@vafest.org.

Event:_____

How did your students respond to the performance?

How did you prepare your students for this performance? Did you use the Education Guide? If so, how? Did students enjoy the materials?

How did this performance contribute to experiential learning in your classroom?

What role do the arts play in your school? In your classroom?

If you could change one thing about this experience, what would it be?

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

(Optional)

Name: _____

School: _____ City: _____

Would you like to be part of our database? ☐ Yes ☐ No