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Review: A Midsummer Night's Dream (c. 1595-6) – William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Directed by Michael Hoffman in 1998, A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedic play based on two pairs of Athenian young lovers. It is set over the earliest hours of the morning. Law classifies the play as a light comedy in the context of a romantic play.

Shakespeare wrote A Midsummer Night's Dream in 1595 or 1596. The play consists of four acts, each dedicated to the problems that the young lovers face. The play is split into three groups, setting a three-story level. The main setting of the play is the official court of Theseus, Duke of Athens, because it is agreed that the city enforces a strict and harsh law, so the representation was transferred to the court of Athens. However, the description of the magical world in the woods shows a sharp contrast with the city. The characterization of Oberon and Puck as magical rulers draws the image of the rural folk as magical and illusory. The heart of this story is an excellent example of comedy, love, and its association with confusion. Full of humor and fantasy, this play is not only fun for the older generation but also for children. The purpose of this comprehensive written analysis of A Midsummer Night's Dream is not only to elaborate on the themes and characters but also to outline the utility and effectiveness of this play, suggesting that the analysis can be carried out in future work.

William Shakespeare was an English playwright and poet who wrote tragic comedies and linked volumes along with about 39 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other works. With a history of criticism and analysis, A Midsummer Night's Dream is an extraordinary example of playwright William Shakespeare's work. It is said that the first performance of A Midsummer Night's Dream took place as early as 1594. The first full book of A Midsummer Night's Dream was published in 1600. With the modern world already fascinated by the various performances and adaptations of the play, the reason why A Midsummer Night's Dream is still so highly regarded today is a testament to its ability to be



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relevant and accessible to the modern world. No matter how many different versions and adaptations of a play exist, including the one shown here, the original version of the play is just as popular, and rightly so.

Historical Context of A Midsummer Night's Dream

The Elizabethan age, when this play was written, was an age in which the theater performed on a grand scale and helped really define the age. The depictions of love and gender, as well as marriage in the Elizabethan era, differed greatly from those of today. The differences in love and marriage, as well as in gender roles, between the Elizabethan and the modern era play a great part in what happens in A Midsummer Night's Dream. In Athens, where the play is set, women had very limited rights, if any at all. However, several decades before this play was written, these rights had been dissolved. Only men over the age of 20 who had Athenian parents had full rights.

The four lovers' actions in the forest also reflect attitudes towards love and marriage in the Elizabethan era. Love was perceived very differently in the Elizabethan era. Many characters in the play show a different side to love as much more of a hobby and source of amusement than as a sympathetic emotion for the opposite sex, as we think of it today. A Midsummer Night's Dream was also influenced by the writings and works of Metamorphoses and The Golden Ass. These works inform us how women of lower status were denied the attention and favors of men of higher status for primarily political and financial reasons. A play set in the "antique lunacy" of Athens also serves to display the tremendous scope of the Elizabethan and Renaissance eras and their interest in classical and especially Greek thought. There was a huge turn towards individuality and personal glory in the play, as there was in the Elizabethan age. It is no coincidence that the setting is Athens, whose name comes from Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Democracy was established in Athens in 508 B.C., and the resulting sense of individuality in the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, was radical. This individual interest was something the Athenians had in common with the English of the Elizabethan age, for these very same ideas were spreading quickly through Europe. In the play, the characters' refusal to bend to the wills of others, particularly in the pursuit of love, is a dominant feature. The pursuit of one's personal interests is also very much something we might associate with the spirit of a democratic society. United with these attitudes are ideals of truth to one's self and the ability to recognize this humanity in others. These are both



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classically humanistic beliefs, which highlight the breadth of Shakespeare's historical context and the subject matter of the play.

Major Themes and Motifs in the Play

A Midsummer Night's Dream, while a romantic comedy by genre, is actually a play about love – a theme so complex, among the expectations and guesses of the characters. There are dreams which, by contrast, make the love felt by humans seem superficial. Additionally, dreams, as illusory as they may appear, have the power to transform a person.

If love is truly depicted in the play as a difficult, irrational feeling, the illusion of love is worth deconstructing, as well as what is considered real: what is the kind of love remotely possible for teenagers just past puberty? Egeus's sense of power over his daughter is reminiscent of what he considers the ownership over the supposed unrequited love Lysander bears towards Hermia. But also, what kind of love affects the spouses in the royal court? While we would like to believe the love between Hippolyta and Theseus is real, the depth of her transformation is questionable. Lastly, a number of political implications can be derived both from the transformative power of imagination – embodied by the world of fairies and the mechanicals' drama – and from the balance between order and anarchy, which is violated by supernatural creatures such as Puck, Oberon, and Titania. Both the political and social considerations in the play converge in the role of feelings and emotions. The irrationality of these last two is at the center of the discourse on the reality of the world in which we live – the more the feelings, a product of the subjectivity and personal history of each individual, is irrational, the less can the world in which we live be real. Thus, between the real and the imaginary, there is no dividing line: behind the veil of reason, the authentic psychological needs and the inner taboos of the characters are revealed. And at the center of all, whether it is the kingdom of the fairies, where the state is an absolute monarchy, or the city of Athens, where a political domain is granted to everyone through the Assembly, is the figure of the woman.

Character Analysis

Shakespeare develops an interesting cast of characters in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Oberon and Titania, as king and queen of the fairies, embody the magical and, at times, fickle elements of love and nature in the play. Similarly, Puck, by transforming the characters around him, contributes greatly to both plight and solution. These powerful figures



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seem, at times, to be above the rest of the characters, representing magic, while the rest of the characters represent the foolish and fickle.

The four lovers in the play represent the chaos and unpredictability present in any romantic endeavor. The jumbling love rectangle is compounded and exacerbated by the ethereal play, resulting in a main battle between Hermia and Helena. Hermia and Helena's lines show the pathetic lengths that they are willing to go to for the interest of a man who does not care for them. This fickle love brings a great amount of humor to the play but also reveals some fundamental truths about love and relationships. The characters are unique as a group, showing the most fickle and least redeeming aspects of love; it seems, in this case, that attraction draws relationships together, not love. The only sentiments worth noting are those of the men, but their love changes as easily as their inconstant hearts. The Mechanicals, on the other hand, provide comic relief, as well as offer a bit of commentary on ambition. The lovers, Titania, and Bottom provide a very cohesive look at the theme of transformations in the play, a theme all in the play are subject to.

With so many characters merging in each other's stories, the question of who the protagonist of the play really is opens up. Returning to the point of transforming, though, a core lesson about human nature is revealed throughout the play. Oberon, Titania, and Puck all possess an aspect to them that places these characters above criticism. Their magic shows great power, and this power directs much of the outcome of the play. Puck and Oberon maintain a cool disposition that is beyond the usual human impulses. As a kind of authority, these characters lack the usual human responses found in real emotions, such as jealousy and ambition and the drive to love and possess. To have, though, or not have—one or both—reads as a common quest for all the play's characters. Such an attractive and tempting outlook serves to, within the world of the play, establish an irrefutable authority. Such authority sheds power and influence in play and reinforces the excessively foolish actions to which the characters are subjected, which makes for such comic air.

Significance and Impact of the Play on Shakespearean Literature

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of the most imaginative and, in some respects, inventive comedies ever written. It not only sustains but also approaches a crest of hilarity by



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trafficking in the convention of the little people, whether girl or boy fairies, staging a royal wedding on Midsummer's Eve, or letting live, acting mortals blur into the roles they are rehearsing for a nuptial masque. No earlier comic of consequence is closer to sheer farce. The play changed the course of Elizabethan comedy and, as it happens, the drift of Shakespearean tragedy and romance as well. Once taken by its innovation, the early playgoer typically carried in memory not only the incongruous confrontation of the human and 'fairy' worlds but also the glamour of the darkling midnight and the exuberance of the conscious, even forced 'confusion.'

Most of the significant literature in this age-old thematic vein produced at least one such play. It was upon this rich tradition, however, and not upon any prose romance, that the never-seen-before structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* mapped itself. In addition to rendering an instance of the theater of the absurd, the *Dream* deviously recasts the naïve or innocent comic error, assuming as it does a peculiar theatrical realism. As a show-biz spectacular, perhaps to be given at the end of a festal masque, a variation upon the theme of the multiple discovery or misled bed so common to low mime and other farces of situation. Also, incipiently, it tests conceptions of the direction and extent of a writer's responsibilities to his creations. Such a collision of worlds and values, persons at cross-purposes, and volunteers experimenting upon themselves, ostensibly for the greater glory of court monarchy, is the play's principal subject - both halves of the play. It authorizes the remarkable multiplication of meanings and significances toward which so much worthwhile critical effort, to say nothing of the playgoer's untroubled yet alert participant observation, has been directed for 400 years.

Reference

Shakespeare, W. (1979). *A midsummer night's Dream*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 251–83.