

# Characters

## Theseus -

Duke of Athens, who is marrying Hippolyta as the play begins.

## Hippolyta -

Queen of the Amazons, she is betrothed to Theseus.

## Lysander -

Hermia's beloved. Egeus does not approve of Lysander, though we don't know why. Lysander claims to be Demetrius' equal, and the play supports this claim — the differences between the two lovers are negligible, if not nonexistent — yet Egeus insists Hermia marry Demetrius.

## Demetrius -

He is in love with Hermia, and her father's choice of a husband for her. Similar to Lysander in most ways, Demetrius' only distinguishing characteristic is his fickleness in love.

## Hermia -

Although she loves Lysander, her father insists she marry Demetrius or be put to death for disobedience of his wishes. Theseus softens this death sentence, declaring that Hermia choose Demetrius, death, or life in a convent. Rather than accept this dire fate, Hermia agrees to run away with Lysander.

## Helena -

She is the cruelly abused lover of Demetrius. With the help of Oberon's love juice, Demetrius finally falls back in love with Helena, and the two are married at the end of the play.

## Oberon -

The King of the Fairies, Oberon is fighting with Titania when the play begins because he wants custody of an Indian boy she is raising. He hatches a plan to win the boy away from her by placing love juice in her eyes. After Puck mistakenly anoints Lysander, Oberon insists Puck fix his mistake so that the true lovers are together by the end of the play. In the final scene, he and Titania bless all of the newlyweds.

### **Titania -**

Oberon's wife, she is Queen of the Fairies. Because of Titania's argument with Oberon, the entire human and natural world is in chaos. Following Oberon's application of the love juice to her eyes, Titania falls in love with Bottom, and Oberon takes the Indian boy from her. Once he has the boy, Oberon releases the spell, and he and Titania are reunited.

### **Puck -**

Oberon's jester, Puck is responsible for mistakenly anointing Lysander with the love juice intended for Demetrius. Puck enjoys the comedy that ensues when Lysander and Demetrius are both in love with Helena

### **Nick Bottom -**

Puck transforms him into an ass, and Titania falls in love with him. When Puck returns Bottom to his normal self, Bottom can't speak about what happened to him but vows to have Peter Quince write about it in a ballad to be called "Bottom's Dream."

### **Egeus -**

Hermia's tyrannical father. He capriciously declares that she must marry Demetrius or be put to death for disobedience.

### **Philostrate -**

Theseus' Master of Revels, he arranges the selection of performances for Theseus' wedding.

### **Peter Quince -**

A carpenter and the director of the group of actors who perform "Pyramus and Thisbe," which he has written for the celebration following Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding.

### **Francis Flute -**

A bellows-mender, Flute plays the role of Thisbe. He is displeased to be given a woman's role because he wants to let his beard grow, but Quince assures him that he can play the part in a mask.

### **Tom Snout -**

Snout is a tinker and plays the role of Wall in "Pyramus and Thisbe."

### Snug -

A joiner, he plays the lion in "Pyramus and Thisbe."

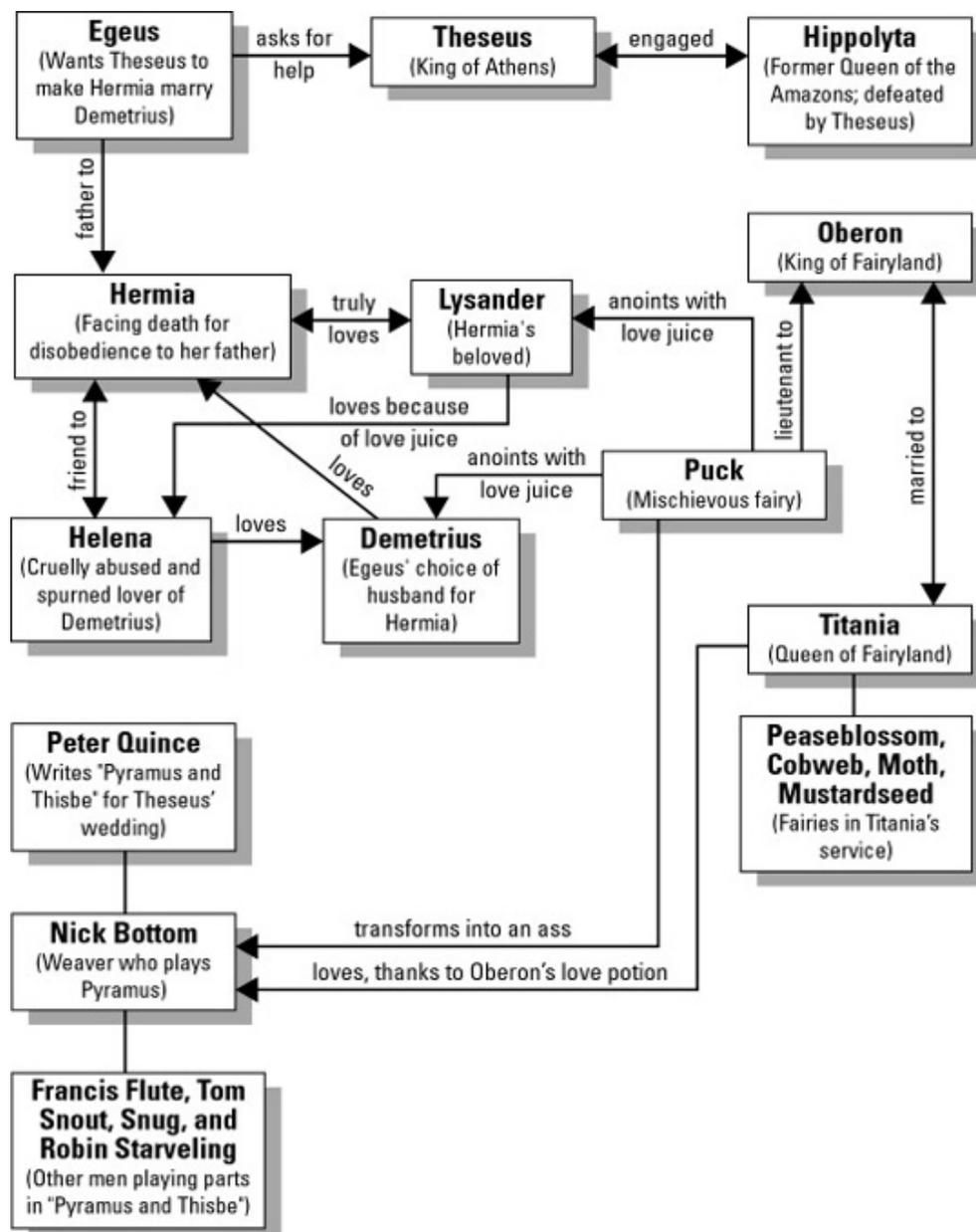
### Robin Starveling –

A tailor, he represents Moonshine in "Pyramus and Thisbe."

### Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed -

Titania's four fairies.

### Character Map -



# Action

## Act I: Scene 1

This scene opens in Theseus' palace in Athens. It is four days before his wedding to Hippolyta, the former queen of the Amazons, and Theseus is impatient with how slowly time is moving. Hippolyta assures him that the wedding day will soon arrive.

As Theseus and Hippolyta plan their wedding festivities, Egeus and his daughter, Hermia, arrive on the scene with Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus is angry because his daughter refuses to marry Demetrius, the man of his choice, but is instead in love with Lysander. Egeus accuses Lysander of bewitching his daughter and stealing her love by underhanded means. Agreeing with Egeus, Theseus declares that it is a daughter's duty to obey her father. Hermia demands to know the worst punishment she will receive for disobedience. Death or spending her life in a nunnery comprise Hermia's choices. Lysander joins the argument, arguing that he is Demetrius' equal in everything and is, indeed, more constant in his affection than Demetrius, who was recently in love with Helena. These proceedings upset Hippolyta, because the prospect of Hermia's death upsets her plans for a happy, festive wedding day.

Finally, everyone except Lysander and Hermia leave the stage. Lysander reminds Hermia that the course of true love has never run smoothly, so they must view their difficulties as typical for lovers. He has a plan for eluding Athenian law: The two lovers will run away from Athens and live with his childless widow aunt to whom he has always been a surrogate son. Living with her, they will be outside of Athenian jurisdiction so that Hermia can avoid Theseus' death sentence and can marry. Having few other options, Hermia is enthusiastic about Lysander's idea and declares her undying love for him.

Just as the lovers have completed their plan for escape, Helena enters the scene. What charms does Hermia possess, Helena wonders, that have so completely captivated Demetrius? Hermia swears that she has no interest in Demetrius, that he actually seems to thrive on her hatred of him. Hermia and Lysander confess their intention of fleeing Athens, and Helena decides to tell Demetrius about it in a final attempt to win his love.

## Act I: Scene 2

In this scene, the action shifts to the cottage of Peter Quince, the director of a band of amateur actors who are planning a play to perform for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. The play enacts the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe, two young lovers who die during a clandestine meeting. Quince is in the process of

assigning roles to the various players but meets with many objections to his casting efforts.

Nick Bottom, the weaver who is an entertaining but foolish man, usurps Quince's authority as director and claims he would like to play all of the roles in the drama. He is cast as lover Pyramus. Flute, the bellows mender, is assigned the role of the heroine, Thisbe. Not happy to play a female role because he wants to let his beard grow, Flute is pleased to learn that he can wear a mask for the performance so he won't need to shave. Snug, the joiner, is cast in the role of the lion.

Bottom wants to appropriate this role (as he wanted to appropriate the others), claiming his roar could make the ladies shriek. His statement makes the players nervous. They worry that if the lion is too authentic, the women in the audience will be frightened, literally, to death: They fear that Theseus might have them hanged for scaring the ladies. Bottom agrees to temper his roar, making it gentle as a "sucking dove," but Quince flatters him by insisting that Snug must keep the part of the lion because only Bottom can play the leading role of Pyramus. When the casting is finally finished, Quince sends the players off to learn their lines and tells them to meet for a rehearsal the following evening at the Duke's oak.

## **Act II: Scene 1**

This scene transports its viewers from Athens into the woods outside of the city, the dwelling place of Oberon, Titania, and their band of fairies. The scene begins with a conversation between Oberon's mischievous elf Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, and one of Titania's attendants. Puck warns her to keep Titania away from this part of the woods because Oberon will be reveling here, and if the two meet there will certainly be a serious quarrel. Oberon is angry with Titania because she refuses to give him a sweet Indian boy upon whom she dotes. Titania's attendant suddenly recognizes Puck, accusing him of being the hobgoblin who is blamed for roguish acts in the village, such as frightening young women or misleading night travelers. Puck admits that he is this "merry wanderer of the night."

Suddenly Oberon and Titania enter the scene from opposite directions. Their bickering begins. Each accuses the other of having had affairs, and Titania says Oberon's persecution of her has caused the current chaos in the world: The rivers are flooding, the corn is rotting, and people are plagued by "rheumatic" diseases. Oberon blames Titania; if she would simply relinquish the Indian boy, peace would be restored. Titania refuses to let the boy go because his mother was a close friend of hers, and when she died in childbirth, Titania agreed to raise her son.

Hatching a plan to win the Indian boy, Oberon sends Puck in search of a flower called love-in-idleness. When the juice of this magical flower is poured on sleepers'

eyelids, it makes them dote crazily on the first live creature they see upon awakening. In this way, Oberon plans to make Titania fall in love with some wild beast; he won't release her from this unpleasant spell until she gives him the Indian boy.

After Puck has left in search of the powerful flower, Oberon sits scheming. Demetrius and Helena unknowingly stumble into his bower, but he is invisible to them. Helena actively pursues her beloved, but Demetrius vows to hurt her if she doesn't leave him alone. After they have left, Puck returns. Taking pity on Helena, Oberon tells Puck to anoint the eyes of the Athenian man (Demetrius) so that he will fall in love with this jilted woman. Puck promises to fulfill Oberon's order, though Puck hasn't seen Demetrius, so he doesn't know which Athenian Oberon is talking about.

## **Act II: Scene 2**

Titania's fairies sing her a soothing lullaby as she prepares for sleep. While she rests, Oberon creeps up, squeezes the potion onto her eyelids and utters a spell to make her awaken when something vile is near.

When Oberon leaves, Lysander and Hermia wander into Titania's bower, but she is invisible to them. The lovers are lost, and Lysander suggests they stop to sleep for the night. Hermia agrees but won't let him sleep too close to her, even though Lysander claims that, because they are engaged, they can sleep innocently side by side. But Hermia insists on separation, so they sleep a short distance apart. After they have fallen asleep, Puck enters, searching for the Athenian whose eyes Oberon wanted him to anoint with the love juice. Seeing Lysander and Hermia lying apart from each other, he mistakes them for Demetrius and Helena and erroneously applies the magical juice to Lysander.

After Puck exits, Demetrius and Helena run into the bower. Helena is in frantic pursuit of her beloved, but he manages to flee his pursuer and sprints into the woods. Depressed and exhausted, Helena stops to rest and notices Lysander asleep on the ground. She wakes him and, thanks to Puck's potion, he immediately falls in love with her. When he claims to have abandoned Hermia, who he now describes as dull and unattractive, Helena assumes he is teasing her so she runs away. Lysander chases after her, and Hermia awakens. She has been dreaming about a fearful snake that ate her heart awake. Frightened that Lysander has disappeared, she, too, rushes into the woods.

## **Act III: Scene 1**

Comedy returns to the play in the opening of this scene. Peter Quince and his company are rehearsing their rendition of Pyramus and Thisbe. Bottom has serious

reservations about the play: Pyramus kills himself with a sword, and the lion is frightening, both factors that are sure to terrify the women in the audience. The other players agree, wondering if the play should be abandoned, but Bottom has a solution. A prologue needs to be written to explain that Pyramus is only an actor, and the actor playing the lion must show half of his face during his performance and tell the audience his true identity. With these problems successfully solved, Quince mentions two other difficulties with the upcoming performance: It requires moonshine and a wall. After consulting a calendar, they discover that the moon will be shining on the night of the performance, so they can simply leave a window open. The wall is a greater dilemma for these silly men. Finally, Bottom discovers a solution: An actor covered in plaster will play the role of the wall. Everyone agrees, and the rehearsal begins.

Puck eavesdrops on the performance, amused by the way these actors butcher their lines. The egotistical Bottom sits in the bushes, waiting his cue, and Puck can't resist playing a joke on him: He gives Bottom an ass' head. When Bottom enters, declaring his love for Thisbe, the other terrified actors dash into the woods. Unaware of his transformation, Bottom has no idea what has frightened them. As he walks singing through the woods, Titania, with the love juice on her eyes, awakens and falls immediately in love with the beastly Bottom. She appoints four fairies — Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed — to serve the needs of her new lover.

## **Act III: Scene 2**

Encountering Oberon in another part of the forest, Puck explains the outcome of his experiments with the love potion. Oberon is pleased to learn that Titania has fallen in love with the monstrous Bottom and that Puck has also fixed the disdainful Athenian. Just after Puck assures him that Demetrius must now love Helena, Demetrius and Hermia enter the scene. Oberon recognizes Demetrius, but Puck realizes this is not the same Athenian he bewitched with the potion. Because her darling Lysander has mysteriously disappeared, Hermia accuses Demetrius of murdering him and hiding the body. Demetrius insists that he didn't kill his enemy, but Hermia refuses to believe him. Giving up the argument in despair, Demetrius sinks to the ground and falls asleep, while Hermia continues her search for the missing Lysander.

Oberon reprimands Puck for anointing the wrong Athenian with the love juice. To correct the situation, Oberon sends Puck in search of Helena and then squeezes the magic potion into the cold-hearted Demetrius' eyes. Lysander and Helena enter the scene, still bickering because Helena thinks he is mocking her. Their voices wake

Demetrius, who falls in love with Helena at first sight, compliments of Oberon's potion. Hearing what she believes are Demetrius' phony declarations of love, Helena is furious: Both Lysander and Demetrius are now making fun of her. When Hermia enters, the situation gets even worse.

Not knowing about the potion-induced change in Lysander's feelings for her, Hermia is shocked when he declares he no longer loves her. Of course, Helena thinks that Hermia is also in on the farce and can't believe her closest childhood friend could be so nasty. After the lovers have all fought and fled the scene, Oberon forces Puck to fix the problem before the men kill each other. He advises Puck to create a deep fog in which the lovers will get lost and, finally, fall asleep in exhaustion. When they awake in the morning, the night's crazy events will seem like a dream except that Demetrius will be in love with Helena. Oberon then rushes to Titania's bower to beg for the Indian boy.

### **Act IV: Scene 1**

Bottom is enjoying his sojourn in Titania's bower: Peaseblossom amiably scratches his head, while Cobweb goes off in search of honey for him. As Bottom sleeps in Titania's arms, Oberon walks in. Feeling pity for Titania's pitiful love for this ass, Oberon squeezes an herb on her eyes to release her from the spell. Titania awakens, telling Oberon about her strange dream of being in love with an ass. Oberon has Puck remove the ass' head from Bottom. Now that Oberon has won the Indian boy from Titania, he is willing to forget their argument, and the two, reunited, dance off together so they can bless Theseus' marriage.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus are walking through the woods when Theseus suddenly spies the sleeping lovers. Egeus recognizes them but wonders how they ended up together because Demetrius and Lysander are enemies. Theseus imagines they woke early to observe the rite of May and remembers this is the day Hermia needs to make a choice about her future. When the lovers are awakened, Demetrius confesses that he now loves Helena. No one really understands what has happened. Theseus decides the lovers should be married along with him and Hippolyta.

As the lovers return to the palace, the scene shifts to Bottom. Just awakening from his dream, Bottom declares he'll have Quince write a ballad about it, called "Bottom's Dream," because it has no bottom.

### **Act IV: Scene 2**

In this short scene, Quince and Flute are searching for their missing friend, Bottom. They worry that "Pyramus and Thisbe" won't be performed without him. Theseus is known for his generosity, and the actors believe they will potentially be

rewarded with a lifelong pension for their stellar performance of this play. As they lament this lost opportunity, Bottom suddenly returns. His friends want to hear his story, but Bottom tells them there isn't time for that now: They must prepare for the play. He warns them to avoid onions and garlic so their breath will be sweet for the "sweet comedy" they will perform.

## Act V: Scene 1

The play has come full circle, and the cast has now returned to the palace where Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the strange tale the lovers have told them about the events of the previous evening. The joyous lovers enter, and Theseus decides it is time to plan the festivities for the evening. Of all the possible performances, the play "Pyramus and Thisbe" turns out to be the most promising. Theseus is intrigued by the paradoxical summary of the play, which suggests it is both merry and tragical, tedious and brief. Philostrate tries to dissuade Theseus from choosing this play, but Theseus thinks its simplicity will be refreshing.

In the remainder of the scene, the players present "Pyramus and Thisbe," accompanied by the lovers' critical commentary. Hippolyta is disgusted by this pathetic acting, but Theseus argues that even the best actors create only a brief illusion; the worst must be assisted by an imaginative audience. Following the performance, Bottom arises from the dead, asking Theseus if he'd like to hear an epilogue or watch a rustic dance. Theseus opts for the dance, having lost patience with the players' acting.

The play concludes with three epilogues. The first is Puck's poetic monologue, delivered while he sweeps up the stage. Oberon and Titania offer their blessing on the house and on the lovers' future children. The play ends with Puck's final speech, in which he apologizes for the weakness of the performance and promises that the next production will be better.

## Themes

### Love

The dominant theme in A Midsummer Night's Dream is love, a subject to which Shakespeare returns constantly in his comedies. Shakespeare explores how people tend to fall in love with those who appear beautiful to them. People we think we love at one time in our lives can later seem not only unattractive but even repellent. For a time, this attraction to beauty might appear to be love at its most intense, but one of the ideas of the play is that real love is much more than mere physical attraction.

At one level, the story of the four young Athenians asserts that although "The course of true love never did run smooth," true love triumphs in the end, bringing happiness and harmony. At another level, however, the audience is forced to consider what an apparently irrational and whimsical thing love is, at least when experienced between youngsters.

## **Marriage**

A Midsummer Night's Dream asserts marriage as the true fulfillment of romantic love. All the damaged relationships have been sorted out at the end of Act IV, and Act V serves to celebrate the whole idea of marriage in a spirit of festive happiness.

The triple wedding at the end of Act IV marks the formal resolution of the romantic problems that have beset the two young couples from the beginning, when Egeus attempted to force his daughter to marry the man he had chosen to be her husband.

The mature and stable love of Theseus and Hippolyta is contrasted with the relationship of Oberon and Titania, whose squabbling has such a negative impact on the world around them. Only when the marriage of the fairy King and Queen is put right can there be peace in their kingdom and the world beyond it.

## **Appearance and Reality**

Another of the play's main themes is one to which Shakespeare returns to again and again in his work: the difference between appearance and reality. The idea that things are not necessarily what they seem to be is at the heart of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and in the very title itself.

A dream is not real, even though it seems so at the time we experience it. Shakespeare consciously creates the plays' dreamlike quality in a number of ways. Characters frequently fall asleep and wake having dreamed ("Methought a serpent ate my heart away"); having had magic worked upon them so that they are in a dreamlike state; or thinking that they have dreamed ("I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was"). Much of the play takes place at night, and there are references to moonlight, which changes the appearance of what it illuminates.

The difference between appearances and reality is also explored through the play-within-a-play, to particularly comic effect. The "rude mechanicals" completely fail to understand the magic of the theatre, which depends upon the audience being allowed to believe (for a time, at least) that what is being acted out in front of them is real.

## Order and Disorder

A Midsummer Night's Dream also deals with the theme of order and disorder. The order of Egeus' family is threatened because his daughter wishes to marry against his will; the social order to the state demands that a father's will should be enforced. When the city dwellers find themselves in the wood, away from their ordered and hierarchical society, order breaks down and relationships are fragmented. But this is comedy, and relationships are more happily rebuilt in the free atmosphere of the wood before the characters return to society.

## Dramatic techniques

### Dramatic irony

In dramatic irony, the audience is aware of something that the character, or characters, is not aware of. In the play, the audience knows that the reason why both Lysander and Demetrius are now pursuing Helena instead of Hermia is due to the fact that Puck enchanted Lysander with the magic flower by mistake. As a result, both men feel that they are legitimately in love with Helena while the audience knows that that is not true. Lysander even claims that his reason has guided him to believe that Helena is the better woman than Hermia, as we see in his lines, "The will of man is sway'd, / And reason says you are the worthier maid" (II.ii.117-118). In addition, Helena disbelieves their sincerity, even accusing both men plus Hermia of conspiring to mock her.

However, these instances of dramatic irony overlap with situational irony because it is purely by accident that both men leave off pursuing Hermia and begin pursuing Helena instead. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, making Lysander fall in love with Helena because she comes into view just as Lysander wakes up. Then, Oberon places the love potion on Demetrius's eyes, just as he had intended to do, making both men pursue Helena. The situational irony created by Puck's mistake also leads to arguments amongst the characters and humorous lines.

### Rhetorical schemes

In particular, Shakespeare uses hyperbaton a great deal, which is purposefully putting words in an unexpected order. Specifically, Shakespeare frequently switches the order of the subject and verb. One example is seen in Helena's important, theme-depicting line found in the very first scene, "[T]herefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind" (I.i.240). In this sentence, "wing'd Cupid" is the subject of the

sentence. In normal word order, the subject begins the sentence followed by the verb. If we were to write this line in normal word order we would have, "Therefore, wing'd Cupid is painted blind," showing us that Shakespeare indeed employs hyperbaton by intentionally inverting the word order.

## Structure of the Play

Showing his usual dexterity in creating coherent dramatic frameworks, Shakespeare here interweaves four separate plots and four groups of characters. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons and Theseus' fiancée, are the first characters introduced. Theseus is a voice of law and reason in the play, as shown by Egeus' entrance into the drama: Egeus needs Theseus to adjudicate a dispute he is having with his daughter, Hermia. The second plot features Hermia and her three friends, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander. These young lovers stand on the boundaries of the law; like many adolescents, Lysander and Hermia rebel against authority, in this case, by refusing to accept Theseus' laws and, instead, planning to escape from Athenian tyranny. Although the lovers have one foot in the conventional world of Athens, the play forces them to confront their own irrational and erotic sides as they move temporarily into the forest outside of Athens. By the end of the play, though, they return to the safety of Athens, perhaps still remembering some of the poetry and chaos of their night in the forest. This irrational, magical world is the realm of the play's third group of characters: the fairies. Ruled by Titania and Oberon, the enchanted inhabitants of the forest celebrate the erotic, the poetic, and the beautiful. While this world provides an enticing sojourn for the lovers, it is also dangerous. All of the traditional boundaries break down when the lovers are lost in the woods. Finally, the adventures of Quince, Bottom, and the other amateur actors compose the play's fourth plot layer.

Shakespeare dexterously weaves these four worlds together, by having characters wandering in and out of each other's world, by creating echoes and parallels among the different groups. For example, the themes of love and transformation reverberate through all levels of the play, creating coherence and complexity. Coherence is also produced by the play's emphasis on time. The action is associated with two traditional festivals — Midsummer Eve and May Day — both allied with magic, mayhem, and merriment. To emphasize further the connections between the different groups, many modern directors of the play cast the same actor for the roles of Theseus and Oberon, and for those of Hippolyta and Titania.