

A Midsummer Night's Dream

INTRODUCTION

FRANCIS MERES mentions *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in his *Palladis Tamia*, of 1598, and it was first printed in 1600. It has often been thought that Shakespeare wrote the play for an aristocratic wedding, but there is no evidence to support this speculation, and the 1600 title-page states that it had been 'sundry times publicly acted' by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. In stylistic variation it resembles *Love's Labour's Lost*: both plays employ a wide variety of verse measures and rhyme schemes, along with prose that is sometimes (as in Bottom's account of his dream, 4.1.202±±15) rhetorically patterned. Probably it was written in 1594 or 1595, either just before or just after *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare built his own plot from diverse elements of literature, drama, legend, and folklore, supplemented by his imagination and observation. There are four main strands. One, which forms the basis of the action, shows the preparations for the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, and (in the last act) its celebration. This is indebted to Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, as is the play's second strand, the love story of Lysander and Hermia (who elope to escape her father's opposition) and of Demetrius. In Chaucer, two young men fall in love with the same girl and quarrel over her; Shakespeare adds the comic complication of another girl (Helena) jilted by, but still loving, one of the young men. A third strand shows the efforts of a group of Athenian workmen±±the 'mechanicals'±±led by Bottom the Weaver to prepare a play, *Pyramus and Thisbe* (based mainly on Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) for performance at the Duke's wedding. The mechanicals themselves belong rather to Elizabethan England than to ancient Greece. Bottom's partial transformation into an ass has many literary precedents. Fourthly, Shakespeare depicts a quarrel between Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the Fairies. Oberon's attendant, Robin Goodfellow, a puck (or pixie), interferes mischievously in the workmen's rehearsals and the affairs of the lovers. The fairy part of the play

owes something to both folklore and literature; Robin Goodfellow was a well-known figure about whom Shakespeare could have read in Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1586).

A Midsummer Night's Dream offers a glorious celebration of the powers of the human imagination while also making comic capital out of its limitations. It is one of Shakespeare's most polished achievements, a poetic drama of exquisite grace, wit, and humanity. In performance, its imaginative unity has sometimes been violated, but it has become one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, with a special appeal for the young.