

FACTFILE:

GCSE DRAMA

Component 3



Knowledge and Understanding of Drama, Exploration of the Set Text

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

Social

- The play includes upper class characters such as Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta, middle class characters including Helena, Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander and working class characters such as Bottom, Snug and Snout;
- The play also includes the underworld of the fairy kingdom and within that world parallel king and queen status exists with Oberon and Titania and a master/servant relationship with Oberon and Puck;
- Elizabethan audiences were made up of all classes with working class audience members standing around the stage and known as 'penny stinkards' as they paid a penny to see the play and stand for the performance. The rest of the audience could pay up to half a crown to be seated with a cushion in a roofed and elevated position;
- The play was written for Queen Elizabeth I, who may have had the play performed for her privately but she also frequented the playhouses to see performances;
- Most of the population at this time were illiterate and they loved to listen and watch plays which were being performed for the first time in London;
- Audiences were restricted from visiting public events when plague deaths had risen;
- Bear-baiting and cock-fighting would have been alternative spectacles for the audiences when plays were not performed;
- Audiences enjoyed eating and socialising during the performances.

Cultural

- The Elizabethan era was a period of renaissance when literature, music and dance were all being written to copy the Italian style of culture;
- Drama was mostly written in blank verse which was unrhymed but had a specific metre which made it easier for the actors to learn;
- The audience of the time were mostly illiterate but loved language and were very much a listening audience;
- Audiences at this time had a great thirst for learning and wanted to be part of the new culture of the arts, learning to read, dance and perform;
- This was a 'golden age' when the arts were being promoted by the monarchy and therefore people were being encouraged to be involved and partake in the new theatre experience on stage or in the audience;

- Women were part of the audience but were not allowed to act on stage so the young female roles were played by young boys whose voices had not yet broken and the older women were played by men;
- The play is set in Athens and includes the culture of Duke Theseus winning his wife in a battle as Hippolyta is Queen of the Amazons; Egeus chooses a husband for his daughter Hermia and if she refuses she can be put to death or given the lesser penalty of being sent to a convent;
- The Elizabethan audiences believed in the underworld and would enjoy the story in the fairy kingdom and spells being put on the lovers. Although there is a darker side to the play, they would enjoy the wedding celebration and happy ending;
- The play is a comedy and Shakespeare wrote fourteen comedies which would have been very popular at that time.

Historical

- A Midsummer Night's dream was written and first performed in 1595. The exact date is unknown and impossible to establish precisely;
- It is known for certain that it was performed at court on 1st January 1605 to possibly celebrate a wedding of nobility at that time;
- The play is one of fourteen comedies written by Shakespeare and one of the most popular of his plays to be performed;
- The play would have been performed at 'The Theatre' and later at the 'Globe Theatre' which was known as 'the wooden O';
- The play is set in Athens in no specific period but the actors would all have been dressed to Elizabethan costumes of the period;
- Elizabeth reigned from 1565 – 1603 and her reign was known as 'the golden' age as she was a huge supporter and promoter of the arts; she encouraged writing and attended plays in the London playhouses;
- James I followed Elizabeth on the throne and his era was darker and more violent with men wearing swords, being involved in violence and spying much more than in the previous reign;

Theatrical Conventions

The Elizabethan Theatre has many theatrical conventions including:

- A 3-tier wooden, circular construction;
- Thrust stage, about 5 feet from ground level, and below this barrels could be rolled for thunder and smoke created for the scene when Puck creates a fog to 'overcast the night';
- An inner-below often curtained and used for more intimate scenes such as Titania's flowery bed;
- A balcony which may have been used by Oberon to spy on Titania and the lovers;
- Two main exit/entrances which were upstage right and left;
- Performances were at 2pm when a white flag was flown;
- Night scenes which were denoted by a lamp or candle being carried such as the final scene which is after midnight;
- Music and dance, for example when the mechanicals perform a bergamask instead of an epilogue at the end of their performance.

Form and Style

- The play is part of the playwright's early work when he was devoting his attention to the lyricism of his work with the main scenes are written in blank verse and the mechanicals' scenes are written in prose;
- There are both monologues and soliloquies written in lyrical blank verse and Oberon's soliloquy is quite poetic while Bottom's soliloquy is in prose and more insightful and humorous;
- In Act 5 there is a 'play within a play' as the mechanicals perform their play in the palace to celebrate the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta;
- One of the dramatic forms used in Elizabethan plays was 'doubling' and A Midsummer Night's dream can

- be played with 12 actors with Theseus and Hippolyta being doubled by Oberon and Titania;
- It was written and performed in Elizabethan style with all male actors wearing appropriate Elizabethan costumes of that period;
- The play is often successfully set in other periods.

Genre

- The play is a romantic comedy and although it is mostly written in blank verse the acting should be realistic;
- The main plot centres around the adventures of 4 young lovers and has the marriage of Duke Theseus and Hippolyta as a background. Although it is set in Athens, the costumes would be Elizabethan;
- Most of the play is set in a forest which is inhabited by fairies and therefore offers opportunity for an underworld of fairies with music, singing and dance;
- The comedy aspect is provided by the six amateur actors called mechanicals who are very poor actors and their text is written in prose;
- The play was originally staged at the Globe Theatre with an open thrust stage covered by a roof supported by pillars. No set was required which therefore made performances non-naturalistic.

Language

- The play is written in both verse and prose. Blank verse is used for the main characters of high status and the prose is generally used for the mechanicals;
- Blank verse has 10 syllables in each line and the metre is iambic pentameter with a stress on every second syllable, 'four days will quickly steep themselves in night';
- There is no rhyme with blank verse but often there will be a rhyming couplet at the end of the scene to let the listening audience know that the scene has ended;
- The mechanicals lines often provide the comedy and are written in more colloquial language, 'and you should do it too terribly', with poorly written poetry 'these lily lips, this cherry nose, these yellow cowslip cheeks are gone, are gone'.

Structure

- The play is written in the classical 5 act structure with the main plot and characters being introduced in act 1, developed in act 2 with the subplot, climax in act 3, resolution in act 4 and denouement in act 5;
- The play is written in a classical 5 act structure with a different number of scenes within each act;
- In the classical 5 act structure, the audience are introduced to the plot and all the main characters. In act 2 the plot and sub plot(s) are developed. By act 3 the plot(s) usually reach their climax, then in act 4 they are resolved and act 5 is the denouement which is what happens as a result of the plots;
- The play can run for up to 3 hours with sometimes 2 intervals if all the music, singing and dancing is included;
- In the Elizabethan tradition, no lighting or curtains would be used and the audience listened for a rhyming couplet or the story sense to work out the end of a scene;
- The play may be performed today on any stage with or without curtains or set.

