

OXFORD SCHOOL  
*Shakespeare*



A MIDSUMMER  
NIGHT'S DREAM  
仲夏夜之梦

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Oxford School Shakespeare

**A Midsummer Night's  
Dream**

**仲夏夜之梦**

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## 序 言

莎士比亚是中国读者和观众都非常熟悉的一个名字。虽然这位世界著名的戏剧大师的名字已在 19 世纪中叶中国出版的书刊上出现,但是他的作品直到本世纪初才被介绍给中国的读者。1903 年,英国作家兰姆兄妹的《莎士比亚戏剧故事集》第一次被译成中文,其中十个故事的文言译文被编成一个集子,题名为《海外奇谈》;次年,商务印书馆又出版了林纾翻译的同一本故事集的全译本,定名为《吟边燕语》。而直到 1921 年,莎士比亚的第一个剧本(《哈姆雷特》)才被田汉完整地译成中文。至今,他的全部剧作已为中国读者所熟悉,每一个剧目起码有两个以上的中译本。

70 年代末以来,中国的莎学发展很快。1984 年 12 月,中国莎士比亚研究会正式宣告成立,并在北京和上海组织了 1986 年和 1994 年两届莎士比亚戏剧节。许多大学的英文系和中文系都把莎士比亚戏剧列为专业必修或专业选修课。莎士比亚已成为深受中国广大读者喜爱的外国作家。曹禺先生在 1984 年为中国莎学会会刊《莎士比亚研究》所写的发刊词中的一段话极好地描述了莎士比亚在中国读者心目中的地位:

“有史以来,屹立在高峰之上,多少文学巨人们教给人认识自己,开阔人的眼界,丰富人的贫乏生活,使人得到智慧、得到幸福、得到享受,引导人懂得‘人’的价值、尊严和力量。莎士比亚就是这样一位使人类永久又惊又喜的巨人。”

莎士比亚生活在 16 世纪下半叶和 17 世纪初的英国,即英国文艺

复兴时期的鼎盛阶段,前后经历了英国的两代君主:伊丽莎白女王和詹姆士一世。对于剧作家生平的史料我们掌握得很少,这是因为在他所生活的那个年代人们并不注重保存有关个人的资料,特别是像莎士比亚这样一个并不属于王室、宫廷和教会的戏剧界人士,更得不到当代人的关注。因此,我们至今仍没有一部可靠的莎士比亚传记,对于他生平和创作生涯的许多细节都只有通过他的作品和我们对那个时代的了解去推测。

莎士比亚出生在英国沃里克郡埃文河上的斯特拉特福镇。关于他早年的生活仅有两条记录,那就是保存在斯特拉特福镇圣三一教堂有关他洗礼和婚约的记载。根据记载,威廉·莎士比亚于1564年4月26日接受洗礼。按当时的习俗,婴儿出生后应尽早受洗,由此英国学者推断他的出生日期为4月23日。而这种推论的原因之一是五十二年后(1616年)他的忌辰恰恰是4月23日。

莎士比亚的父亲是当地的皮手套工匠,还兼营谷物、羊毛和皮革的买卖,先后担任过镇上的多项公职。莎士比亚四岁那年,他当选为市政委员会执行官,即镇长。作为长子,莎士比亚可能就读于当地的文法学校。十三岁时家道中落,年轻的莎士比亚可能不得不放弃学业,跟着父亲学手艺,以弥补家用。1582年,年仅十八岁的莎士比亚与邻村农户的女儿安·哈瑟维结婚,安比威廉大八岁。次年,他们的长女苏姗娜出生;1585年,一对双胞胎又降临人间。在此后的七年间,我们没有任何有关莎士比亚的记载。但有一点是可以肯定的,那就是在此期间他离开了家乡,到伦敦去谋生,并加入了剧团,开始了他的戏剧生涯。

有关莎士比亚的下一个记载始于1592年。从当时著名的剧作家罗伯特·格林的一篇文章中可以看出莎士比亚在1592年间已在伦敦舞台上颇具名望。在这篇名为“百万的忏悔换取的一先令的智慧”的文章中,被誉为“大学才子”之一的格林借用莎士比亚剧中的台词来攻击他是“一只暴发户式的乌鸦”,“用我们的羽毛装点了起来,用一件演员的外衣包起了他的虎狼之心”。从这篇醋意十足的文章中可以看到莎士比亚于90年代初已在伦敦的戏剧界站稳了脚跟,但他加盟后来被称为“宫廷大臣剧团”的具体时间却无从推断。

莎士比亚发表的第一部作品是他的一首长诗《维纳斯与阿多尼斯》(1593年)。在他二十多年的创作生涯中,他一共写了两首长诗、一百五十四首十四行诗和三十七部剧本。与同代人相比,莎士比亚几乎把他的全部精力都放在戏剧创作之上,他的长诗和十四行诗都是在瘟疫流行、伦敦剧场关闭、剧团不需要新剧目期间写成的。

英国的戏剧起源于中世纪教堂的礼拜仪式。当时的弥撒中有表演动作的对话性轮唱,这就是英国早期戏剧的雏型。后来,这种表演形式逐步世俗化,也慢慢走出了教堂,发展成为以圣经故事和圣徒事迹为主的奇迹剧和以宣传教义、进行道德劝诫为目的的道德剧。直到16世纪中叶伊丽莎白女王登基,这些中世纪的戏剧形式仍在英国流行。当时的英国戏剧尚没有固定的演出场所,一队队云游四方的戏子常在客栈的院子里或达官贵人的宅邸搭起临时的舞台。直到1576年,伦敦才有了第一座专供戏剧演出的建筑,起名为“剧场”,职业戏剧演员才开始在英国戏剧的发展过程中发挥出他们的作用。但是,英国文艺复兴时期戏剧的变革直到1587年克里斯托弗·马洛的《贴木尔》被搬上舞台才拉开了序幕。马洛、托马斯·基德、约翰·黎里和格林奠定了英国“新戏剧”的基础,而莎士比亚的三十七个剧在很大程度上则代表了英国文艺复兴时期“新戏剧”的最高成就。

莎士比亚戏剧的创作年代现在已经无从考证,甚至连这些剧本的创作顺序也无案可查。现有的记载仅仅能够显示向政府注册登记的出版日期和剧场演出的记录。在1623年出版的第一对开本中,莎士比亚戏剧被划分成喜剧、历史剧和悲剧三大类,而我们今天通常在这三类剧种之后再加上一个类别——传奇剧(又称悲喜剧),专指莎士比亚创作生涯后期的几个剧目。

对于莎士比亚戏剧发展阶段的划分西方学者也颇有争议。现在比较流行的一种说法是根据他的艺术技巧的发展和莎剧的情调把他的戏剧创作生涯划分成四个阶段:(1)早期抒情时期;(2)历史剧和喜剧时期;(3)悲剧时期;(4)传奇剧或悲喜剧时期。

第一阶段包含了三个喜剧——《错误的喜剧》、《爱的徒劳》、《维洛那二绅士》;还有历史剧《亨利六世》(上、中、下篇)和悲剧《泰特斯·安德

洛尼克斯》。作为一名年轻的剧作家,这是莎士比亚的试笔阶段,或曰他的学徒期。有一部分人认为,这个时期莎士比亚的主要工作是改写原有的剧本,但是作为戏剧界的一名新手,又怎么可能承担起改编原有剧本的任务呢?应该说,这一时期莎士比亚的主要精力放在学习当时英国舞台流行的不同剧种之上:《错误的喜剧》是移植古典喜剧的典型例子;《亨利六世》显然受到马洛历史剧的影响;《泰特斯·安德洛尼克斯》是模仿基德开创的复仇悲剧的一个并不十分成功的例子。而在《爱的徒劳》和《维洛那二绅士》这两个喜剧中,我们则看到了剧作家对新剧种的一种尝试:前者属于浪漫喜剧,后者含有讽刺喜剧的不少要素。

第二阶段创作的历史剧有:《约翰王》、《理查三世》、《理查二世》、《亨利四世》(上、下篇)和《亨利五世》。还有《仲夏夜之梦》、《威尼斯商人》、《驯悍记》、《温莎的风流娘儿们》、《无事生非》、《皆大欢喜》、《第十二夜》等七个喜剧和悲剧《罗密欧与朱丽叶》。现代观众并不欣赏的历史剧在16世纪90年代走红并不是偶然的,原因不外乎两个方面:政治的需要和文学传统的影响。自亨利七世于1485年继承英国王位之后,为了巩固都铎王朝的统治,英国的君主提倡和鼓励在文学作品中宣传代表兰开斯特家族的亨利七世与约克家族的联姻最终结束了长达三十年的英国内战这一历史事件,并将此说成是上天的旨意,而亨利七世和他的继承人则被称作是6世纪英国亚瑟国王的化身。在由此而流行起来的历史题材文学作品中,历史被看成是历史事实的一种积聚,这些历史事件不仅会重复发生,而且能够从中预测未来,因此对人们有一定的教育意义。历史剧在莎士比亚的笔下达到了其发展过程的顶峰。其中的八部集中展现了英国14至15世纪百余年间的重大史实,带有浓厚的政治色彩,也反映了16世纪后期的道德观。这一时期的喜剧以浪漫喜剧为主,这种喜剧形式与风行于16世纪下半叶的欢乐明快的田园诗不无关系。虽然黎里和格林可以被称作浪漫喜剧的奠基人,但最终还是莎士比亚创作了堪称浪漫喜剧典范的几部剧作:《仲夏夜之梦》、《无事生非》、《皆大欢喜》和《第十二夜》。连这一时期的悲剧《罗密欧与朱丽叶》似乎也深受浪漫主义情调的影响。与第三阶段的悲剧相比,《罗密欧与朱丽叶》缺乏深度,也缺乏后期悲剧那种催人泪下的强大感召力,

它留给观众和读者最深的印象是一对青年男女之间纯真的爱情,是他们在一起短暂的幸福时刻。

第三阶段以莎士比亚的四大悲剧——《哈姆雷特》、《奥赛罗》、《李尔王》和《麦克佩斯》——为主,同期的悲剧还有《尤里乌斯·凯撒》、《雅典的泰门》、《安东尼和克莉奥佩特拉》和《科里奥拉努斯》。应该说,经过前两个阶段的准备,莎士比亚的戏剧艺术在这一时期达到了巅峰。如果说《尤里乌斯·凯撒》还是历史剧和悲剧相结合的产物的话,那么在《哈姆雷特》中莎士比亚的全部注意力则集中在悲剧人物的塑造和悲剧气氛的烘托上了。莎士比亚的四大悲剧标志着英国悲剧发展的新阶段。在这几个剧中,造成主人公悲剧下场的不再是命运或其它外界的力量,而主要是他们各自独特的性格。剧作家对悲剧主人公精辟的剖析反映了人文主义思想对莎士比亚的影响。这种人物塑造和剖析使他的悲剧获得了深刻的内涵,也是赋予这四大悲剧持久生命力的主要原因。在这一时期,莎士比亚还推出了三个喜剧:《终成眷属》、《一报还一报》和《特洛伊罗斯与克瑞西达》。这几个剧与前期的浪漫喜剧形成了鲜明的对比。虽然剧中的主题仍是爱情与婚姻,但这里已没有丝毫明快的气氛,我们看到的只是伪善、背叛、腐败等社会阴暗面。虽然每个剧都有一个喜剧性的结尾,但故事的结局却很难使观众和读者感到满意。因此,这几个剧常被称作“阴暗喜剧”或“问题剧”。这大概就是悲剧时期剧作家创作的喜剧的特点吧。

最后一个阶段包含了四个传奇剧——《泰尔亲王佩里克利斯》、《辛白林》、《冬天的故事》、《暴风雨》以及一个历史剧《亨利八世》。在这一时期,莎士比亚的戏剧艺术已经失去了原有的锋芒,剧作家的注意力似乎更多地放在迎合当时观众的口味上。剧本更多地强调曲折离奇的情节,而缺乏对于人生或社会问题的分析。由于剧中的故事常以悲剧情节开头,转而实现恶人忏悔、好人昭雪、失而复得的大团圆结局,因此,后期的传奇剧也常被称作悲喜剧。

1612年,莎士比亚结束了他的创作生涯,离开伦敦,返回他的故乡斯特拉特福镇,住进他于1597年购得的镇上第二大住宅——“新居”。1616年4月23日,这位著名的诗人、剧作家与世长辞。他被安葬在镇



上的圣三一教堂内,基石上刻着这样几句话:

“看在耶稣基督的份上请住手,  
切勿挖掘这片基石下的尸骨。  
谁在这里动土将受到诅咒,  
谁尊重我的遗体将会得到祝福。”

莎士比亚并没有为后人留下一个庞大的家族,他的子女不是终身不育就是早年丧子。到了 17 世纪中叶,威廉和安以及他们的子女都已先后过世。然而,莎士比亚留给我们的却是他那些不朽的著作。1623 年,他的三十六个剧本第一次被收集成册,这就是著名的第一对开本。在为第一对开本所写的题辞中,莎士比亚的同代诗人和剧作家本·琼森称他为“时代的灵魂”,并宣称:“他不属于一个时代而属于所有的世纪。”

何其莘

## A great occasion

Think of a wedding—a very special wedding, because the bridegroom is a most important person. He is of noble birth, and for many years his family has owned the land for miles around their stately home. He is a good landlord—his tenants, the workmen living on his estate, love him and share in the rejoicing at his marriage. As a kind of wedding-present they have rehearsed a play to entertain the guests when the religious ceremonies are completed and the feasting is over.

The paragraph you have just read is not intended as a summary of the action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is a simple description of *any* great wedding in Elizabethan England; many are reported in the chronicles of the time.

But one particular wedding must have been very grand. The guest of honour (almost more important than the bride and bridegroom) was the Queen herself, Her Majesty Elizabeth I of England. And the entertainment was provided not by well-meaning amateurs, but by a company of professional actors. The play they performed had been written especially for this occasion by the best dramatist of the time—Mr William Shakespeare.

What kind of entertainment would be *right* for this very special occasion? Nothing solemn or serious—the audience is relaxed and happy. Not a critical satire: wedding guests have not come to hear an intellectual debate. Something romantic—and at the same time comic; with poetry—songs—dances; with speeches in praise of married love—and also (because the Virgin Queen is to be present) in praise of chastity and the single life. And perhaps a little touch of magic—because for the two people most intimately concerned, the bride and bridegroom, their wedding is a mystical event, which must be celebrated with proper ceremony.

I'm sure that Shakespeare did not sit down and make such a list of ingredients! Writing a play is not a mechanical act, but a work of imagination; and Shakespeare's mind was never more actively imaginative than when he created *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But the 'ingredients' that I have listed are all present in the play (and there are many more besides). All are calculated to charm, honour, amuse, and arouse the sympathies of two noble Elizabethan families, assembled with their friends and their Queen to witness the marriage of two young people.

Afterwards, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* became the property of the theatrical company for which Shakespeare was the leading dramatist. It was performed in public theatres at the end of the sixteenth century, and it has delighted audiences ever since. It was a favourite in the nineteenth century, when it was produced in London *with real rabbits*. Parts of the plot have been used for ballet and opera, and the play has inspired great painters and musicians. Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March', first written in the early nineteenth century to introduce Act 5, is still the most popular music played at English weddings when the newly-married couple walk out of the church together.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not like any of Shakespeare's other plays; this is why I want you to think about the circumstances in which it was first performed. Shakespeare is famous for creating characters who are so convincing that they sometimes seem more real than the people in ordinary life. For centuries readers and audiences have argued about the Prince of Denmark, the hero of the play *Hamlet*. Is this man good or bad? Should he have revenged his father's death, or not? But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the characters are simple to understand, and there is no doubt why each one acts as he or she does. And the play does not really have a main plot—unlike the other thirty-six plays that Shakespeare wrote. There are three stories, or 'actions', in this play.

- a) a love story, showing the changing relationships between four young people;
- b) a comic account of amateur actors struggling to rehearse and perform a very bad play;
- c) a fairy story, in which the king of the fairies quarrels with his queen, punishes her, and then forgives her.

These three actions are almost entirely separate from each other, and the characters concerned in one story usually do not know anything about the other stories. Yet all three actions, and the characters belonging to them, are connected: but the threads that tie them together are very delicate.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare is offering (instead of his usual strong plots and profound character-studies) a wide variety of entertainment, ranging from uproarious comedy to a serious account of the nature of poetic imagination. The different elements are linked together and unified by the theme that runs through the play. It is a most appropriate theme for the occasion: love and marriage.

## Characters in the play

Before their stories begin, I think it will be helpful to look at the characters whom Shakespeare has brought together into this play. There are three stories—and *four* sets of characters.

### 1. Theseus and Hippolyta

These two figures are from Greek mythology. Theseus was the son of a legendary king of Athens, closely related to Hercules, the Greek super-man. There are many narratives which tell how Theseus fought with monsters; how he killed the Minotaur that threatened to destroy the island of Crete; how princesses fell in love with him; and how he defeated an invasion of Amazons and married their queen, Hippolyta.

From time to time during the course of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare refers to the myths, re-creating Theseus as an almost-historical being.

The Amazons were a nation of women-warriors, who despised men and refused to marry. It was thought that they came originally from Africa, and that they conquered almost the whole of Asia before being defeated by Theseus. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins just a few days before the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, and the play ends on the night of the wedding. Nothing *happens* to the two legendary figures, but their marriage provides Shakespeare with a kind of framework for the stories of his own invention.

### 2. The lovers

Hermia and	These are creatures of Shakespeare's imagination, although he
Helena	took their names from the classical traditions that gave him the
Lysander and	persons of Theseus and Hippolyta. Because the lovers are
Demetrius	Athenians from classical Greece, they worship the gods of Greek
	mythology. Hermia is prepared to become a nun in the service of
	Diana, goddess of chastity; and Helena blames Cupid, the
	mischievous god of love, for all her misfortunes.

But these lovers are not figures from the dim and distant past. Hermia is a hot-tempered young woman who is very conscious of the fact that she is smaller than Helena, and rather jealous of her

friend's fair-haired beauty. And Helena, tall and blonde, suffers agonies of love for the man (Demetrius) who once promised to marry her and who has now fallen in love with Hermia. Demetrius is only distinguished from his rival Lysander by being much more competitive. He wants to win Hermia's hand in marriage (although she says she does not love him), and he constantly tries to impress everyone (especially Theseus) with his witty comments.

### 3. The workmen

Often, when these comedy characters are mentioned in the play, we are reminded that they too are Greek: 'Hard-handed men that work in Athens here' (5, 1, 72). But we ignore the reminder. The amateur actors are essentially sixteenth-century Englishmen, whose names declare their occupations:

- Quince the carpenter: his name is taken from the 'quoins'—wedge-shaped pieces of wood used in building.
- Snug the joiner, who must make the pieces of wood fit snugly together.
- Snout the tinker, whose regular job it was to repair the snouts—spouts—of kettles.
- Bottom the weaver, so called because in weaving the thread is wound on a reel or 'bottom'.
- Flute the bellows-maker; a whistling sound is produced when bellows are squeezed to blow air either on to coals (to make the fire burn) or into church organ-pipes.
- Starveling the tailor, who owes his name to the popular belief that tailors were always very thin.

Although they are called 'rude mechanicals' (3,2,9), we must not assume that these men have had no education. Snug, obviously, was not very bright at his lessons: he confesses that he is 'slow of study' (1,2,63). But Elizabethan tradesmen certainly sent their sons to school, and this is perhaps where Bottom learned the long words that he is so proud to use (although he is not very sure of their meanings). Peter Quince is the most intelligent of workmen. He can correct mispronunciations and misunderstandings, and he knows about the fables of classical mythology. He would certainly have learned this at an Elizabethan grammar school.

When these characters wish to express themselves emphatically, or utter a mild oath, they do not call upon the classical gods. Instead they swear 'By'r lakin' or 'Marry'—invoking the Virgin Mary and showing that they belong to a Christian tradition.

## 4. The fairies

Every community has its own superstitions concerning beings that are neither human (although they may appear in human form) nor divine. These are immortal, and usually ageless. They possess some magical powers, and they can use these either to assist mortals or to annoy them. The beliefs vary from one nation to another; within the British Isles ideas about fairies vary from county to county. Often one small village cannot agree with its nearest neighbour about the invisible creatures that live in the nearby woods, or underneath the hill, or at the bottom of the garden. It is not surprising that Shakespeare knew a lot about supernatural beings and their activities. As a boy he lived in a small market-town, and fairy stories are much more common in the country than in cities. In addition, he read widely, learning from books about the more *literary* types of fairy. The human characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* come from at least two different worlds—the world of classical mythology and the everyday world of Elizabethan England. And the fairies, too, belong to different traditions.

**Titania** is the fairy with the longest history. The Roman poet Ovid gives this name to Diana, goddess of chastity. Shakespeare's fairy queen is certainly not a goddess, but there are some similarities between Titania and the pagan deities. Early in the play Titania speaks (2,1,123ff) of having women followers (like an order of nuns) who devote themselves to her service. Most importantly, she is convinced that her quarrels with Oberon have caused havoc in the lives of the 'human mortals': the fairies have neglected the proper ceremonials, and as a result the elements—wind, rain, and sun—have been disturbed (2,1,82ff). Titania is, however, quite unlike the classical goddess of chastity, because she is married to Oberon.

**Oberon** Titania's husband first appears as king of the fairies in a French romance written in the fifteenth century and translated into English shortly before Shakespeare wrote his play.

Shakespeare gives Oberon a wife, and he also suggests that, like Titania, Oberon belongs to the period of classical myth. Titania accuses Oberon of being in love with Hippolyta; and Oberon in turn accuses his wife of giving too much assistance to Theseus (2,1,76ff). There is no 'truth' in these mutual accusations, of course; as Titania says, they are 'the forgeries of jealousy' (2,1,81).

In the play, however, these 'forgeries' serve two useful purposes. It is common for husbands and wives to taunt each other

about past love affairs, and this quarrel makes Oberon and Titania seem much more real. Also, because we recognize Hippolyta and Theseus as full-sized human beings, we are encouraged to think of the fairy king and queen in the same dimensions. Shakespeare does *not* want us to do this with the other fairies who are their attendants and courtiers.

Peaseblossom      Only four of the fairy attendants have names, but as we read we  
Cobweb            imagine that there are many more than four of these tiny creatures.  
Moth               Certainly one nameless fairy has a 'speaking part', and it is he (or  
Mustardseed      perhaps she) who first describes fairy forms and activities. We are  
told (in *Act 2*, scene 1) that the fairies are very small: compared to  
them cowslips are 'tall', and acorn-cups make safe hiding-places.  
The four names suggest that their owners are not only tiny but also  
very fragile: a cobweb is easily brushed aside, and moths must be  
handled very delicately.

Shakespeare had no source for these fairies except his own invention. English children today recognize them easily, but they were quite unknown before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. When narratives composed earlier than this play tell of 'fairies' they refer to quite different creatures who are the size of human beings and usually hostile to mortals. A particularly unpleasant trait of these 'old style' fairies was their habit of stealing beautiful human children from their cradles, and substituting weak or ugly fairy children. The babies who were exchanged in this way were known as 'changelings'—and this practice is alluded to in *Act 2*, scene 1.

Shakespeare's fairies, however, care for human beings. They also (we are told) look after the wild flowers in the woods. But their chief occupation is dancing, usually in a formal circle, and it seems as though this activity casts some kind of spell, making the place safe and even holy. Oberon explains carefully that he and the fairies of his court are not evil spirits, like the ghosts of damned souls who can only appear during the hours of darkness (3,2,388ff). Yet the fairies are particularly associated with night, and they are most awake when mortals are asleep.

Puck                Probably the most famous of all Shakespeare's fairy characters is Puck—but Puck is not the product of the dramatist's own imagination. Until Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it was possible to speak of a puck, or *the puck*. A puck was simply a *kind* of fairy, and stories about pucks are common throughout the British Isles. They were mischievous beings, able to change their shapes into human or animal forms, and especially

likely to appear as flickering lights to mislead travellers in the night. At heart, however, the puck was a friendly spirit—and sometimes called 'Robin Goodfellow': he was sympathetic to mortals who spoke politely to him: kind to lovers; and always ready to help the housewife who tried to keep her home clean and tidy. Shakespeare refers to many of the qualities that tradition attributes to the puck, and he places this fairy at the centre of his play. Puck is given an official position in the fairy court, where his job is to 'jest to Oberon, and make him smile' (2,1,44). He is Oberon's agent when the king of the fairies tries to help the human lovers; and it is he who is responsible for all the complications that arise in the play.

Perhaps it is also Puck who expresses the feelings of the audience when he contemplates the situation and remarks, with gentle amusement, 'Lord what fools these mortals be' (3,2,115).



## *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins and ends in Athens. Here is Theseus's palace, and the home of Peter Quince. It is a civilized society in which every man knows his place, from the duke (whose function it is to administer law and justice) to the humblest workman (who must take care not to offend the ladies). This is where we first meet the human characters. Theseus and Hippolyta are eagerly awaiting their wedding-day; the lovers have already got their relationships in a tangle; and the workmen have started a project far more adventurous than anything they have undertaken before.

Theseus and Hippolyta remain in Athens whilst we (as audience or readers) accompany the lovers and the workmen on their *separate* expeditions outside the city walls, into the forest that surrounds Athens.

The forest belongs to the fairies: Athenian law does not operate here. Oberon tries to impose some kind of rule, but he is not a god and he makes mistakes. The first scene in the forest shows us the fairies at their best and at their worst. At their best they are caring for the wild flowers; at their worst they are quarrelling furiously, and their quarrels have serious repercussions in the lives of human beings.

The lovers and the workmen enter the fairy realm and soon become aware of the strangeness of their surroundings. It is a strangeness that grows frightening as night approaches.

Shakespeare is not precise about the length of time that the humans spend in the woods. The first forest scene is brightly lit: Oberon greets his wife with the words 'Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania' (2,1,60). But the night (if it is the *same* night) seems to grow darker. There are mistakes and misunderstandings. The mortals are all lost: they cannot find the way out of their own problems, or out of the wood. The workmen managed to escape (with some damage to their clothing), but the lovers are separated in the darkness and eventually lie down to sleep feeling alone and afraid. In fact they are all together, and perfectly safe.

The time spent in the forest is the period immediately before Theseus's wedding, and that has been arranged so that