



# Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

## England and the Fairy World

The fairy world and the pagan sprites of the natural world were still a very real thing to most Elizabethan people of all ranks. Some of the things they believed were:

- Fairies were the same size as human beings and were often mistaken for regular people. Shakespeare may have been one of the first to imply that they were small beings.
- They were dangerous and were often blamed for accidents, deaths, natural disasters and bad weather. Because of this danger, humans would try to keep fairies content and give them whatever they desired.
- They did not have wings.
- Fairies had green eyes and were thought to be beautiful.
- They dressed in green because they were beings of the forest and nature.
- They loved cleanliness and would reward the neat and tidy and punish those folks who were messy.
- They depended on humans for meat, bath water, bread and drink. Their favorite food was milk or cream.

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



### SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

- Born around April 23, 1564  
Married Anne Hathaway.
- They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603. He wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- He wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* around 1595 or 1596.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

## Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research fairies in English folklore. How were fairies perceived in Shakespeare's day? What were the distinctions between "good" fairies and "bad" fairies? What is a changeling? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changeling>  
<http://mdsmrnytdrm.blogspot.com/2009/05/elizabethan-englands-fairies.html>
2. Research the traditional stories about Puck and Robin Goodfellow in English folklore. This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>
3. Research the mythological figure Cupid. In what ways is he similar to Puck? In what ways is he different? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.wisegeek.com/who-is-cupid.htm>
4. In English folk tradition, what are the festivals of Midsummer, also known as Summer Solstice and May Day? When did they take place? What pagan rituals were associated with them? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer>  
<http://libcom.org/library/a-history-of-mayday>
5. Shakespeare often takes his characters out of the city and into the forest. What are the significant differences between these two settings? How might people behave differently in the city and in the forest? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-green-world.htm>

6. Research Theseus and Hippolyta in Greek mythology, and in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. These and other websites provide information:  
[www.britannica.com/topic/Theseus-Greek-hero](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Theseus-Greek-hero)  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyta>  
[www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/mssources.html](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/mssources.html)
7. Research the inclement weather of 1594–1596 in Elizabethan England and read Titania's speech from Act II, scene i, lines 81–117. What are the similarities between the weather in 1594–96 and the weather that Titania describes? These and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.islandnet.com/~see/weather/almanac/arc2011/alm11jun.htm>  
<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2909905?uid=3739856&uid=4579940077&uid=2&uid=3&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=21102131916507>
8. One of the plots in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows a group of "mechanicals" rehearsing and performing a play called *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*. Read Act III, scene i, in which the workmen solve the problems presented by the technical demands of their play. What do their solutions tell us about theatre production in Shakespeare's time?
9. Shakespeare took the plot for the play-within-a-play of Pyramus and Thisbe from an earlier version of the story written by Ovid. Read the original story that Shakespeare used as his source material. These and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.online-mythology.com/pyramus\\_thisbe/](http://www.online-mythology.com/pyramus_thisbe/)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramus\\_and\\_Thisbe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramus_and_Thisbe)

## After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on the festivals of Midsummer's Eve and May Day. How are the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* influenced by these celebrations and their rituals?
2. Nature is one of the most important elements of the play. How is it incorporated in Shakespeare's language? What is the relationship of each character to nature? How does nature influence people's actions? Whose actions influence nature? How is nature incorporated into the scenic and costume designs?
3. Define the three parallel worlds of the play. How does Shakespeare use language to describe and define each? What are the similarities among the three worlds? The differences? Which characters are confined to a single world? Which characters move between worlds? How does the 2026 OSF production use scenery, costumes, lighting and sound/music to define each?
4. A traditional belief of the Elizabethans was "As above, so below." That is, events at a higher (social and/or spiritual) level filter through all the levels below it. What are the chaos and discord at the play's highest level (the supernatural kingdom of the fairies)? How is it expressed through the rest of the levels, including the natural world? How is harmony restored to all levels?
5. Refer to your research about Theseus and Hippolyta. What episode in their stories does the play incorporate? What qualities of the mythological Theseus does Shakespeare's Theseus embody? What Amazonian qualities are present in Shakespeare's Hippolyta? What are the conflicts between Theseus and Hippolyta? How are they resolved? How does OSF's production incorporate elements of the characters' mythological characteristics while setting the story in a different time period?

6. All four women in the play are subject to the will of men. What does each want? Which man is thwarting her and how? What options are available to her? What is her status? How much power does she have? In each case, who is obliged to yield, and how is the yielding brought about?
7. How does Shakespeare use the character of Puck to tie together the stories of Oberon and Titania, the lovers, and the mechanicals?
8. A major theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love and its power over people in love. What actions are the characters compelled to take because of love? Where are the characters in the beginning of the play in terms of love, how do they change as the action progresses, and where do they end up?

"The course of true love never  
did run smooth."  
-Lysander



Detail. Arthur Rackham - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Heinemann, 1908, New York Public Library.



Theseus and Hippolyta. Stewartcreative.



Costume design for Helena by Sonya Berlovitz.

- Lysander says, "The course of true love never did run smooth." How does Shakespeare highlight the difficulties of love?
- In the play, what is the relationship of love and friendship? When is friendship subordinated to love?
- Compare the relationships of Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania, Helena and Demetrius, and Hermia and Lysander. What are their similarities? Their differences? What does Shakespeare reveal about the nature of love by comparing these relationships?



- Find examples of contrasts and opposites: in characters, language, society, rank, stature, natural versus supernatural, nature versus civilization, love versus hate, etc. What does Shakespeare achieve by placing so much emphasis on antithesis?
- What are the contrasting characteristics of Titania and Bottom. What does Shakespeare accomplish by pairing them romantically?
- What verbal devices are used to create an atmosphere of magic? What technical effects created magic in the production? Why is magic important to the world of the play?

## LET'S PUT ON A PLAY!

The Rude Mechanicals or working men of Athens, represent hundreds of years of working-class people making theatre in their communities. For centuries, common folks celebrated momentous occasions, like weddings, saints' days, festivals, changes of leadership, and more with performance.

By the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, towns were putting on multi-day festivals featuring biblical plays called "Mystery Cycles" using pageant wagons, which were essentially theatres on wheels. These enormous, decorated carts would roll through

the streets of England, each a mini-stage with painted backdrops, trap doors, and simple stage magic. One famous pageant wagon was of Noah's Ark and had live animals marching up ramps and used painted cloth waves to represent the great flood.

People who performed on pageant wagons were not professional actors; they were part of the craft guilds—groups of skilled artisans such as weavers, carpenters, and tailors. Each guild spent months crafting costumes and sets, often competing for the

most elaborate wagon. The Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are carrying on this proud tradition of creating community theatre.



Chester Mystery Play pageant wagon - Wikimedia Commons.

- What is the significance of the play's title? Whose "dream" is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Find references to sleeping or dreaming in the text. What parts of the play have a dreamlike quality? Which characters have trouble distinguishing between imagination and reality? Why?
- The word "moon" is used 28 times and the word "moonlight" six times in the text. Find the passages where these words occur. Why are references to the moon appropriate? What does the moon symbolize? How does Shakespeare use language to create an atmosphere of night and magic?
- One of the most common occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is transformation. List the instances of transformation in the play. Who and what are the agents of transformation? Which transformations progress from a good condition to a worse one? From lesser to greater? Which characters go through the entire play without changing? How does the symbolism of the moon support the theme of transformation?



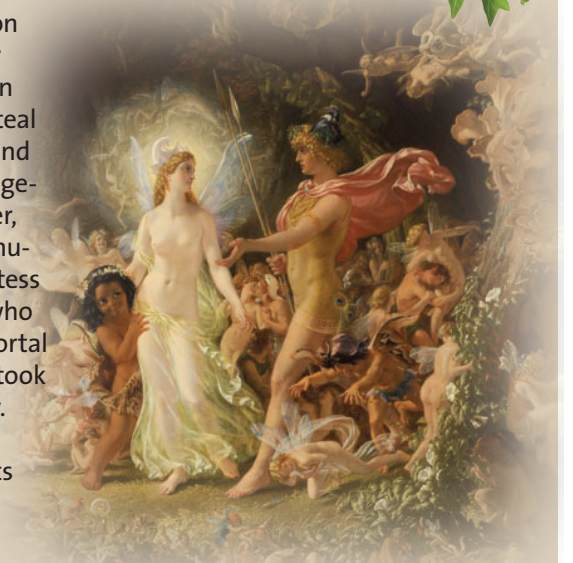
Costume design for Oberon by Sonya Berlovitz.

- Refer to your research about fairies. What is their relationship to darkness? What are their qualities and powers, according to Oberon? According to Puck? When are they frightening? When are they benign?
- Oberon is called "King of Shadows." The actors are referred to as "shadows." How do the supernatural and the craft of acting seem to be related in the play?
- Compare and contrast Hermia and Helena. Shakespeare gives them very different physical attributes, but how do they differ emotionally? What are their opinions of love and friendship? What effects do they have on those around them, and how does that change through the course of the play? Then compare Lysander and Demetrius in the same way.
- Refer to your research about Shakespeare's source material for the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. What language devices does Shakespeare use to turn the tragic story into a comedy? What devices do the actors use to make it funny (even if not intentionally)?
- If you were to design *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what artistic style might influence you? Why?
- Scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the same year he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. Compare these two plays. What are the similarities? The differences? What is the potential for a tragic ending for the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? How is a tragic ending avoided? What is the potential for a happy ending for the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*? What prevents a happy ending for these lovers? Compare the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to *Romeo and Juliet*. How are these two stories similar? Different?

## THE QUARREL

The King and Queen of the fairies appear in many tales under many different names. The name Oberon shows up frequently, most prominently in the French 13<sup>th</sup>-century tale *Huon of Bordeaux*. The name Titania is used in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is the classical source Shakespeare used more than any other. As with Theseus and Hippolyta, Shakespeare may have taken the Oberon and Titania plot from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where in *The Merchant's Tale* the King and Queen of the fairies are fighting, although about something entirely different. In *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania are found arguing over the future of a "changeling boy." In European folklore, fairies would steal human babies from their cradles and leave an imp, or imposter—a changeling in its place. In *Dream*, however, the "changeling boy" is an actual human child. His mother was a priestess of an order worshipping Titania, who speaks of her fondly. When the mortal woman died in childbirth, Titania took the baby as her own responsibility. Oberon is jealous of the attention Titania is giving the boy, and wants him to become a member of his entourage.



The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania by Joseph Noel Paton, 1849 – Google Art Project.



A child levitating due to the influence of witchcraft. From the book, *Saducismus Triumphatus*. William Faithorne (1616–1691).



Hermia and Helena. Illustration by Arthur Rackham (1867–1939).

Shakespeare was just over 30 years old and coming into his greatness as a playwright when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Within the space of a year, he would also write his first great tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, and his first great history, *Richard II*. Shakespeare was also probably writing his 154-poem sonnet cycle at about the same time. Verse and verse structures were very much at the forefront of Shakespeare's mind during this period. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains more verse than any other comedy of Shakespeare's, just as *Romeo and Juliet* has the most of any tragedy, and *Richard II* is written entirely in verse.



Reginald Scot (1537–99)

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1595 or early in 1596. Not everyone, however believed and in 1584 a man named Reginald Scot wrote a pamphlet ridiculing belief in witches and fairies called *The Discovery of Witchcraft*. Scot was trying to end the prosecution of alleged witches by rationally pointing out that folklore was groundless superstition. In the piece he talks extensively Puck and also mentions a magical charm to turn a man's head into a donkey.

Titania and Bottom, Detail from the painting by Edwin Landseer.



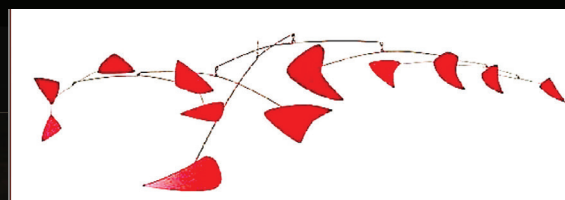
Costume design for Cobweb by Sonya Berlovitz.

Witches Preparing for Sabbath, print, Jacob de Gheyn II (circa 1565–1629).

## SCENIC INFLUENCES

American artist, Alexander Caldwell's work influenced the design of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Look closely at Calder's Red Mobile and at the set design for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by Lucianna Stecconi.



Where on the set can you see the influence of Red Mobile?

How has the set designer changed and incorporated it?

Why might this art have contributed to the design of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

If you were to design the set for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what artstyle would inspire you? Why?



Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department created the "2026 Study Guide for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No part of the "2026 Study Guide for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department.

Red Mobile, by Alexander Caldwell.

Set design for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by Lucianna Stecconi.