

Contents

INTRODUCING SHAKESPEARE 1

- About This Translation 1
- Line Counts 3
- Source of the Play 3
- Shakespeare's Life 4
- Shakespeare's Language 5
- Shakespeare's Theatre 7
- Stage Directions 8
- Solo Speeches 9
- Teaching Suggestions 9
- Additional Teaching Suggestions 10

SUMMARIES OF ACTS AND SCENES 12

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION 16

STAGING *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* 23

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 27

APPENDICES AND GLOSSARY 30

- I. Guide to Pronouncing Proper Names in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 31
 - II. Shakespearean Time Line 33
 - III. A Brief Look at Some of Shakespeare's Sources 35
- Glossary 37

INTRODUCING SHAKESPEARE

There is an aura of unreality about the plays of Shakespeare, and students feel this, although they may not be able to express their reactions precisely. They may say that Shakespeare's language is "too flowery" or that people in real life don't talk the way these characters do. And this is true. The people one meets in real life are not nearly as articulate as the characters in Shakespeare. It would probably be unbearable if the people one met at the bank and the supermarket, in school or during meetings, spoke unrelievedly in the style of the great poets.

Shakespeare's characters lack the foggy-mindedness found in everyday life; they are concentrated and fully in command of their verbal resources. Shakespeare's is a world in which the brain and the heart and the tongue are directly connected. It's perhaps a world that doesn't exist, but what an interesting world it is, one in which people have fully realized their potential—for good and for evil. To have imagined such a world and to have put it on paper is Shakespeare's achievement. And it is why he is read and performed today.

Making Shakespeare's world accessible to students is the reason for this edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a facing-pages translation with the original text on the left-hand side and a translation into contemporary English on the right. The translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not meant to take the place of the original. After all, a translation is by its very nature a shadow of the original. This translation is an alternative to the notes usually included in modern editions. In many cases these notes interfere with the reading of the play. Whether alongside or below the original text, they break the rhythm of reading and frequently force the reader to turn back to an earlier page or jump ahead to a later one. Having a translation that runs parallel to the original, line for line, allows the reader to move easily from Elizabethan to contemporary English and back again. It's simply a better way to introduce Shakespeare.

Also, this translation is suitable for performance, where no notes are available to the audience. Admittedly, a well-directed and well-acted production can do much to clarify Shakespeare's language. And yet, there will be numerous references and lines whose meanings are not accessible on a first hearing. What, for instance, does Egeus mean when he accuses Lysander of having "stolen the impression of her fantasy"?

ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

Since 1807, when Charles and Mary Lamb published *Tales from Shakespeare*, adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have attempted, more or less successfully, to broaden the audience for these plays—or perhaps, to restore to Shakespeare the

full audience he had known in the seventeenth century. These days prose paraphrases of the original are offered to students. Insofar as they succeed, these paraphrases offer a kind of literal rendering of the original, largely stripped of metaphor and poetry. To read them by themselves, without reference to the original, would make you wonder why Shakespeare is still popular.

The translation in this edition aims to retain the feel and the rhythm of the original, but at the same time to be immediately comprehensible to modern audiences and readers, so that they can experience Shakespeare in much the same way the Elizabethans did. That means preserving the sound and the spirit of the original.

Here, for example, is a passage taken from the third act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hermia is angry because she thinks Demetrius has harmed her love, Lysander:

Now I but chide; but I should use thee worse,
For thou, I fear, hast given me cause to curse.
If thou hast slain Lysander in sleep,
Being o'er shoes in blood, plunge in the deep,
And kill me too.

The first three lines present little difficulty. The trouble begins in line four with the phrase *being o'er shoes in blood*. It is roughly equivalent to our modern day expression of “up to our knees” in something. In Shakespeare’s time, it would have meant someone capable of reckless or rash actions. In effect, Hermia is saying, if you’ve gone this far, why not take the plunge, and go all the way.

To be effective and authentic, a translation into contemporary English should not only be immediately clear, but should have the ring of Shakespeare. The original and the modified parts should meld so seamlessly that, if you did not have the original at hand, you might think you were reading it:

Now I only scold; but I’ll say even worse
If I find you’ve given me the cause to curse.
If you’ve slain Lysander in his sleep,
Are ankle-high in blood, then plunge in deep,
And kill me too.

Here, for comparison, is another approach to translating Shakespeare. Although clear to a modern reader, it does not have the feel and the sound of Shakespeare:

Now I’m fairly calm; but I’ll really start to yell
If I find you’ve given me cause to hate you.

Between the subject *she* and the verb *would imitate* come two prepositional phrases and a parenthetical comment that interrupt the normal sequence. Again, have your students look for the subject and then the verb and put the two together. The rearranged sentence, though clear, will probably not be as rhythmical as Shakespeare's.

SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

When most people think of a theatre building, they picture the proscenium arch auditorium, but, of course, there are other types: the thrust stage, the black box (a room designated for performances and painted or draped entirely in black), and the "found space" of a converted cafeteria or campus quad. The closest to Shakespeare's theatre, the "Wooden O" of the Globe Theatre, is the present-day arena theatre where the audience surrounds the stage. The Globe, where most of Shakespeare's plays were originally produced, was a circular or polygonal wooden structure of galleries surrounding an open courtyard area. In the middle of this courtyard was a covered wooden platform. Immediately in front of this platform was the area designated the "pit" (much later it became our modern orchestra pit, and the seats sold as orchestra seats) where the groundlings stood. These were the rowdy, uneducated rabble who paid a small fee to attend a play, and the low comedy elements in Shakespeare's plays were directed toward them. Patrons who could afford it paid more and sat in the surrounding galleries or even on the stage itself.

Most of the play's action took place on the platform itself. At the rear of the platform was a curtained alcove which could be used to represent an inner room or a tomb, depending on the needs of the play. On the second level, above the alcove, the area, uncurtained, could serve to represent a bed chamber or balcony. The third level of this back wall could serve as yet another setting but was more often where the musicians sat.

The fourth level was closed off from the audience, and from there came the sound effects such as the morning lark referred to by Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The platform had trap doors. Right and left of the mainstage area were tiring, short for retiring, rooms where the actors could dress.

There were no curtains to conceal the mainstage from the audience, so plays flowed from scene to scene without interruption, or perhaps with only the slightest pause or brief musical interlude to indicate a change of time or place.

Because the Globe was open to the air, performances could utilize the natural illumination of daylight, although torches were also used. The whole structure of the Globe (and other theatres that imitated it) reminds us of the yards of inns where the first traveling companies of medieval actors often played.

Athens and decide to rest there till daybreak. Lysander suggests that they share the same patch of grass:

One turf shall serve as pillow for us both.

Although there is no stage direction indicating that Lysander has moved in close to Hermia, she says:

Lie further off yet; do not lie so near.

In a different scene of the same act, Puck tells the Fairy to make “room” for “here comes Oberon,” his master. The Fairy replies “and here my mistress.” At this, Puck and the Fairy probably move aside to allow for the entrance of the king and queen of Fairyland. But there is no stage direction to mark this transition. Urge your students, as they read, to try and picture in their mind the characters and their movements on the stage.

SOLO SPEECHES

There is another difference between the plays of Shakespeare and most modern ones—the solo speeches. These are the asides and the soliloquies in which a character reveals what is on his or her mind. Contemporary dramatists seem to feel that the solo speech is artificial and unrealistic. Oddly enough, modern novelists frequently use a variety of the solo speech. Some critics feel that this convention has given the novel extra power and depth, allowing writers to probe deeply into the motives of their characters. One thing is certain—Shakespeare’s plays without the solo speeches would not be as powerful as they are.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

There are several ways in which this edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be used with students, but perhaps the most effective is to assign a long scene or several short scenes in the translation for reading as homework. Then, in going over this material in class, use the original. This way much valuable time can be saved. Students no longer have to struggle with understanding the basic story, and you can devote your time to providing insights and in-depth appreciation of the play.

For some students, of course, the original text will still represent a formidable obstacle. In those cases, you may want to use the translation as the basis of classroom presentation with carefully selected passages from the original to illustrate the points you are making. The great advantage of this edition is its flexibility in a variety of teaching situations.

SUMMARIES OF ACTS AND SCENES

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Theseus, Duke of Athens, is discussing wedding plans with his betrothed, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Theseus orders his Master of the Revels, Philostrate, to prepare entertainments for the celebration that is to take place with the rising of the new moon on May Day. An angry father, Egeus, enters with his daughter Hermia and her two suitors. Egeus insists that Theseus order Hermia to marry his choice, Demetrius, but Hermia begs for the right to choose her own husband, Lysander. Although Theseus agrees to give Hermia time to consider her options, he does remind her that if she will not marry Demetrius, she must enter a convent or face execution. Hermia and Lysander then plan to meet in the woods and travel to his aunt's home, where they will be beyond the jurisdiction of Athens, and can be married. They confide their plans to Helena, Hermia's best friend, who was jilted by Demetrius after he met Hermia. Since she still loves him, Helena tells Demetrius of the lovers' plan, hoping this will gain her some favor with him.

Scene 2

In the town a group of amateur actors gather in the home of Peter Quince, a carpenter, to rehearse a play, "The Most Lamentable Comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe," that they hope to present for the Duke on the night of his wedding day. Bottom the weaver wants to play all the parts at once but finally settles for Pyramus the lover. Although Flute the bellows-mender would rather play a knight, he is assigned the part of Thisbe, Pyramus' fair lady. The others are assigned their parts, and they agree to meet in the woods outside Athens to rehearse.

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, in service to Oberon, the Fairy King, meets with Moth, a fairy in the service of Titania, the Fairy Queen. They discuss the current quarrel of the king and queen over a changeling boy. Titania is raising him for his late mother, a friend of hers, but Oberon wants him for a pageboy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

ACT ONE

1. What Athenian marriage custom seems startling today?

COMMENT: Since in the United States there is no custom of “arranged marriages,” we find it startling that Hermia’s father not only can dictate whom she may marry, but the law of Athens supports him. A daughter who does not obey her father’s wishes in the matter is faced with a cloistered life or execution.

2. What former relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta is implied?

COMMENT: They formerly were at war with one another but now that Theseus has captured Hippolyta he promises that he will treat her with love and gentleness, and wed her “in another key.” This attitude continues throughout the play as he refers to her in tender loving terms.

3. What causes the unsought rivalry between Hermia and Helena?

COMMENT: Even though Hermia has chosen Lysander, Demetrius will not give up his pursuit of her. Previously he wooed Helena, but he has since abandoned her, and now Helena, who is still in love with Demetrius, must compete with Hermia for his attention. To cheer Helena and make her feel part of their lives, Hermia and Lysander confide their plans to her.

3. Rather than being addressed by the usual first and last names, how are the artisans of the town addressed?

COMMENT: They are addressed by name and occupation, so we have such designations as Snug the joiner and Bottom the weaver. This serves to identify each man by his craft in a way that provides a little comedy (the joiner named Snug and the bellows-mender named Flute) and allows us to learn something about him. For instance, Flute is probably chosen for the female role because he is young (he says he has just begun to grow a beard) and perhaps his voice has not yet changed.

4. How pleased is each man with his part in the play to be rehearsed?

COMMENT: Some have little comment, but Bottom would rather play a tyrant or dictator than a lover; Flute would rather play a wandering knight than a woman; and Snug is worried that he will not be able to learn his lines. This not only provides some comedy, but it foreshadows the humorous reception of their performance before the Duke.

**APPENDIX I:
GUIDE TO PRONOUNCING PROPER NOUNS IN A
MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

Aegle	ĒG-lē
Aeneas	ē-NĒ-ŭs
Antiope	ǎn-TĪ-ō-pŭ
Apollo	ŭ-PŌL-ō
Ariadne	ǎR-ĭ-ǎD-nē
Aurora	ō-RŌ-rē
Bacchanals	BĀK-ŭ-nǎlz
Cadmus	KĀD-mŭs
Centaur	SĒN-tŏr
Crete	kret
Cupid	KIŪ-pĭd
Daphne	DĀF-nē
Demetrius	dē-MĒ-trĭ-ŭs
Dido	DĪ-dō
Egeus	ē-JĒ-ŭs
Helena	HĒL-ē-nŭ
Hercules	HĒR-kiŭ-lēz
Hermia	HĒR-mĭ-ŭ
Hippolyta	hĭ-PŌL-ĭ-tŏ
Leander	lē-ǎN-dēr

APPENDIX III:

A BRIEF LOOK AT SOME OF SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCES

"The Legend of Thisbe" is one of the tales Geoffrey Chaucer told in his *Legend of Good Women*. In this passage Thisbe finds the body of her beloved Pyramus:

"Who has done this? Who has been so bold as to slay my love? Oh, speak, my Pyramus! I am your Thisbe who calls you." And then she lifted up his head. The poor man, who was not quite dead, when he heard the name of Thisbe cried out, lifted up his heavy, dead-like eyes to her then down again and gave up the ghost. Thisbe rose up without cry or noise of any kind, saw her bloody veil, his empty scabbard, and the sword that had killed him. Then she spoke, "My sorrowful hand is strong enough for the task I must perform. For love shall give me strength and boldness to make a deep enough wound. I will follow you in death."

Another work of Chaucer's, "The Knight's Tale" from his *Canterbury Tales*, supplies some of the details Shakespeare may have used to fill out his account of the marriage of Theseus and the Amazon queen Hippolyta. In this passage Chaucer's Knight begins by explaining,

Well, as old stories tell us,
 There was a Duke named Theseus;
 He was lord and governor of Athens,
 And in his time was a great conqueror,
 With no one greater under the sun.
 He had won many rich countries;
 What with his wisdom and his chivalry,
 He had conquered all the domain of the Amazons,
 Which was then called Scythia,
 And married the queen Hippolyta,
 And brought her home with him to his country
 With much glory and celebration.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which Shakespeare has Quince adapt for the artisans' play, can be found in Book Four of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this excerpt we can see how the young lovers dealt with the wall that separated them:

There was a chink in the wall between their homes,
 A flaw the careless builder had never noticed,
 Nor had anyone else for years detected,
 But the lovers found it—what eyes are sharper than love's!—
 And made it the hidden mouthpiece of their voices.