



GLOBE EDUCATION SHORTER SHAKESPEARE



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

- Get straight to the heart of the play
- Understand the whole story
- Read Shakespeare's language with confidence

Introduction

Shakespeare the writer

Shakespeare would probably be amazed that you are studying one of his plays in school over 400 years after his death. He did not write his plays to be read, he wrote them to be performed. When he wrote, he expected a company of skilful actors to interpret and perform his play for an audience to listen to and watch. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was printed in his lifetime, but eighteen of his plays were only printed after his death in a collection of his plays known as the *First Folio*.

Prose and verse

Most of the time, Shakespeare wrote *blank verse* – verse where the ends of the lines do not rhyme. So what makes it verse? It has a rhythm. Normally there are ten syllables in every line. Shakespeare wrote the lines to be spoken with the stress on every second syllable. Try saying,

“*baa-boom baa-boom baa-boom baa-boom baa-boom*”.

Moving on to a line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, try saying it with the same rhythm and stress:

“*So will – I grow, – so live, – so die, – my lord,*”

Shakespeare can break the rules of blank verse, but he does not often do so in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He does use prose instead of verse. Less socially important characters often speak in prose, as do comic characters. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the workmen who plan to put on a play are both, and they speak in prose – except when they are performing their play.

Shared lines: Sometimes Shakespeare had two characters share the ten syllables that make a line (as Hippolyta and Theseus do on the right). He did this when he wanted the actors to keep the rhythm going. This was often to show the characters are particularly close, or when one is impatient.

Hippolyta	Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, Four nights will quickly dream away the time, And then the moon, like to a silver bow New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night Of our solemnities.	5
Theseus	Go Philostrate, Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments,	10

Counting lines: You can see the number 5 at the end of the first line above right. It is normal to print the line number every five lines in a Shakespeare play. This helps people find an exact place when talking or writing about the play. If you count, however, you will see that line 10 is six lines after line 5 – the two lines that make the shared line only count as one.

Act and Scene: Printed plays are divided into Acts and Scenes. On the stage there is no real gap – a new scene happens when the story moves on, either to a new time or place. When Shakespeare's company performed indoors by candlelight they needed to trim the candles about every half an hour, so they picked points in the story where a short gap between scenes made sense. These became the divisions between Acts.

Act 5 Scene 1

Enter Theseus, Hippolyta, with Philostrate and other lords and attendants.

Hippolyta

'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.
More strange than true. I never may believe
These antic fables, nor these fairy toys.

Elision: Elision is the correct term in English Literature for leaving a bit out. Shakespeare does it a lot. Often he can not quite fit what he wants to say into his ten-syllable line, so he cheats – running two words together. In the highlighted examples do not say *it is*, say *'tis* – the inverted comma shows you there is something missing.

Stage Directions: Shakespeare wrote stage directions – mainly when characters enter or exit, but sometimes telling actors what to do. In this book we develop Shakespeare's stage directions a bit, to tell you what you would see if you were watching the play.

Some stage directions are in square brackets, we print them as part of an actor's lines. These help you understand who the actor is talking to – which would be obvious on stage. *Aside* is a significant one – this is when the character shares their thoughts with the audience.

Enter Puck, unseen by the others on stage.

Puck

[*Aside.*] What hempen homespuns have we swagg'ring here,
So near the cradle of the Fairy Queen?
What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor,

45 and so every one: and you all do that

46 hempen homespuns: stupid peasants (only poor people wore the scratchy cloth made from hemp)

The glossary: Some words and phrases have changed their meaning or fallen out of use since Shakespeare's time. The glossary helps you with them. It gives you the line numbers in the play (in red); then the word, or the start and end of a long phrase (with three dots to mark the elision where some words have been left out), in **bold**; then the explanation in modern English. It is as close to the original line as we can make it.



Oberon drugs Titania, who is sleeping next to the Indian Boy, lines 14–20. How does what the audience sees of Titania contrast with what Oberon says?

1 As Oberon pours the juice into Titania's eyes, what do his words tell the audience about his character?

The questions: There are questions in the photo captions, and in red boxes. Here are two tips for answering them:

- There usually is not a simple 'right' answer. We hope you will develop your own ideas. The best way to answer any question is to back up your answer with a reference to the play text.
- Unless we tell you otherwise, you can answer the question using the play text on the opposite page.

From left to right, Flute, Bottom, Snug, Quince (standing on the stool), Starveling and Snout

Why might the director have chosen to have the actor playing Peter Quince standing on a stool?

Amateur actors

In Shakespeare's time, skilled workmen like Bottom and the others had to belong to a guild in order to work in their trade. A guild was an organisation of workers. There was a guild for each trade, such as weaving (Bottom) or carpentry (Quince). In medieval times it was traditional for guilds to put on religious-themed plays at certain times of year. This habit had more or less died out in Shakespeare's time. Other groups also put on amateur plays – for example the universities and the law schools.



Act 1 Scene 2

Enter Quince (the carpenter), Snug (the joiner), Bottom (the weaver), Flute (the bellows mender), Snout (the tinker), and Starveling (the tailor).

- Quince** Is all our company here?
- Bottom** You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip.
- Quince** Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit through all Athens, to play in our interlude 5 before the Duke and the Duchess, on his wedding day at night.
- Bottom** First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on, then read the names of the actors, and so grow to a point. 10
- Quince** Marry, our play is, *The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*.
- Bottom** A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, call forth your actors by the scroll. Masters, spread yourselves. 15
- Quince** Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver.
- Bottom** Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.
- Quince** You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.
- Bottom** What is Pyramus? A lover, or a tyrant?
- Quince** A lover that kills himself, most gallantly, for love. 20
- Bottom** That will ask some tears in the true performing of it. If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes. I will move storms; I will condole in some measure. To the rest — yet my chief humour is for a tyrant. I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in. 25
- The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates.
And Phibbus' car 30
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish Fates.
- This was lofty. Now, name the rest of the players. This 34 is Ercles' vein, a tyrant's vein. A lover is more condoling.
- Quince** Francis Flute, the bellows-mender.
- Flute** Here, Peter Quince.
- Quince** Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.
- Flute** What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?

- 1 company:** group of actors
- 2 generally:** he means 'severally' (one at a time: he uses many malapropisms – words used wrongly)
- 3 scrip:** list
- 5 interlude:** short play
- 6 before:** in front of
- 8 treats on:** is about
- 9–10 grow to a point:** reach your summing-up
- 11 Marry:** 'by the Virgin Mary', used at the start of a sentence for emphasis as 'well' is now
- 11 lamentable:** sad
- 12 Pyramus and Thisbe:** tragic lovers in a famous story
- 15 spread yourselves:** spread out
- 21 ask:** call for
- 22 look to their eyes:** be prepared to be moved to tears
- 23 condole:** show great sorrow
- 24 my chief humour is for:** I'd rather play
- 24 Ercles:** the Greek hero Hercules
- 25 rarely:** amazingly well
- 25 to tear a cat in:** for ranting and raging
- 30 Phibbus' car:** the chariot of Phoebus Apollo, the Greek sun god
- 32 mar:** ruin
- 33 Fates:** three women in the myths of many cultures who controlled human life
- 34 lofty:** impressive, grand
- 35 vein:** way of carrying on
- 39 wandering knight:** knight travelling in search of adventure

Boys and men as women

In Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to act in public theatres. Boys and men played all the parts. An acting company usually included experienced actors and boys learning their trade as apprentices. Leading female roles, such as Titania, Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were played by boy actors whose voices had not yet broken. Some older men specialised in playing older women; sometimes seriously, sometimes in a comic style.



Bottom

How is Bottom suggesting he might play Thisbe?

Quince It is the lady that Pyramus must love. 40

Flute Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming.

Quince That's all one. You shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

Bottom An I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice. "Thisne, Thisne!" — "Ah, 46 Pyramus, my lover dear, thy Thisbe dear, and lady dear."

Quince No, no, you must play Pyramus — and Flute, you Thisbe.

Bottom Well, proceed.

Quince Robin Starveling, the tailor. 50

Starveling Here, Peter Quince.

Quince Robin Starveling, you must play Thisbe's mother. — Tom Snout, the tinker.

Snout Here, Peter Quince.

Quince You, Pyramus' father; myself, Thisbe's father. Snug, 55 the joiner, you, the lion's part. And I hope here is a play fitted.

Snug Have you the lion's part written? Pray you, if it be, give it me, for I am slow of study.

Quince You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring. 60

Bottom Let me play the lion too. I will roar, that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. I will roar, that I will make the Duke say, "Let him roar again, let him roar again."

Quince If you should do it too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek, and 65 that were enough to hang us all.

Bottom But I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.

Quince You can play no part but Pyramus, for Pyramus is a 70 sweet-faced man, a proper man, as one shall see in a summer's day, a most lovely gentleman-like man. Therefore you must needs play Pyramus.

Bottom Well, I will undertake it. What beard were I best to play it in? 75

Quince Why, what you will.

Bottom I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfect yellow.

Quince Some of your French-crowns have no hair at all, and 80 then you will play bare-faced. But masters, here are

43 that's all one: it doesn't matter
43 you may: you need to
44 as small as you will: as high-pitched as you can
45 An: if

57 fitted: well-cast

59 of study: to learn things
60 extempore: without a script

67 aggravate: he means 'moderate'
68 sucking dove: he confuses two phrases for gentleness: 'sitting dove' and 'sucking lamb'
68 an 'twere: as if it was

76 what you will: it's up to you
77 discharge: play
78 purple-in-grain: deep red
79 French-crown-colour: golden or yellow
80 Some of ... at all: Some Frenchmen are bald (refers to syphilis, then called 'the French disease', which caused baldness)



From left to right: Flute (Thisbe), Bottom (Pyramus), Quince (standing on a stool), Starveling, and Snout; Quince is speaking lines 82–5.

How do the actors' expressions show how their characters feel about their parts in the play?

your parts. *[Handing out scripts.]* And I am to entreat you, request you, and desire you, to con them by tomorrow night, and meet me in the palace wood, a mile without the town, by moonlight. There will we rehearse, I pray you, fail me not.

85

Bottom We will meet, and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously. Take pains. Be perfect. Adieu.

Quince At the Duke's Oak we meet.

90

Bottom Enough. Hold or cut bow-strings.

They exit.

83 con: learn

85 without: outside

88 obscenely: he means 'obscurely' – secretly

88 take pains: make an effort

88 Be perfect: learn your parts thoroughly

91 Hold or cut bow-strings: keep your word or be disgraced (an archer's saying, stand and fight or give up)

Bottom and clowns

Most acting companies included at least one 'clown'. This was someone who was good at comic parts. Most clowns added to the part written for them, probably adding *ad libs* depending on audience reaction. Sometimes stage directions refer to 'a clown' or 'clowns' (see page 41) instead of listing the parts played by the comic actors. The workmen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were all clowning, but the main clown part was that of Bottom.

These questions are about all of Act 1 Scene 2.

- 1 In what ways is the dialogue in this scene different from the way the characters speak in the previous scene? What impact does this have on the way we see the Mechanicals?
- 2 Peter Quince and Bottom dominate the dialogue in this scene. If you were directing a performance of the play how would you advise the actors playing them to speak and move to show what they want to do with their play?
- 3 At the time Shakespeare was writing, rich and powerful people **often** asked actors to put on plays for special events. What might an audience at the time have thought about a group of ordinary workers hoping to put on a play for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding?
- 4 How does this scene begin the theme of confusion and things being turned upside down that runs through the play?
- 5 What does an audience learn about the character of Bottom in this scene? Think about the way he interrupts Quince and how he tries to take the role of several characters in the play.

These questions ask you to reflect on all of Act 1.

- a) How are words and imagery used in Act 1 to show different emotions such as anger, true love and also comedy?
- b) In Act 1, how important is it for an audience to understand the way in which people from different levels of society behaved in Shakespeare's time?
- c) How is the theme of true love not running smoothly begun in Act 1? As well as the lovers in Scene 1, think of Scene 2 and the play Bottom and the others are planning.
- d) What does the audience learn about the main characters in Act 1?
- e) What do we learn about the position of women in the Athens of the play in Act 1?

How to do well in assessment

Most importantly, you should aim to enjoy the Shakespeare play that you are reading, and start to think about why Shakespeare makes the characters act as they do and what the main themes of the story are. You should also begin to consider the language that Shakespeare uses. This is also a great start for studying Shakespeare at GCSE.

There are a series of skills that will help you in any assessment of your understanding of a Shakespeare play. They are:

- Read, understand and respond to the play clearly. Comment on the characters' behaviour and motivations, using evidence from the text.

In other words, you need to show that you know the play and can answer the question that you have been given.

- Analyse the language, form and structure that Shakespeare uses. Show your understanding of Shakespeare's techniques by explaining their effects. Use subject terminology.

Here, you show that you understand how the play has been written by commenting on the words and techniques that Shakespeare uses. Also, you should demonstrate that you understand and can use appropriate technical language.

- Show understanding of the relationship between the play and the context in which it was written.

You must show that you understand the connections between the text and the time that it was written. This could be historical events, like the Gunpowder Plot, but also people's social and cultural beliefs of the time – such as a belief in witches – and how these affect the way that the characters think and behave.

- Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

This means that your work should be clear, organised and well-written. You are not expected to have perfect spelling, but you should spell key words and character names correctly and use correct grammar.

Advice for answering questions

Remember the skills that have explained above. You will usually not have to show every single skill in every answer that you write. For example, extract questions usually require you to cover the first two skills – commenting on characters' behaviour and looking at how the play has been written. Remember that there is not one perfect answer to any question. Consider how you feel about the characters' actions. It is perfectly acceptable to use phrases such as, 'I think,' 'I feel that' and 'In my opinion' when answering. The most thoughtful responses often show originality, but remember to support your points with sensible argument and evidence from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.