

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

**by**

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**EXTRACT**

## CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT - SCENE BY SCENE	4
THE CHARACTERS	7
A MENTION OF SOME PAST APPROACHES TO THE PLAY	11
A BRIEF GUIDE TO SPEAKING SHAKESPEARE	13
WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY	
ACT ONE, SCENE ONE	15
ACT ONE, SCENE TWO	29
ACT TWO, SCENE ONE	32
ACT TWO, SCENE TWO	40
ACT THREE, SCENE ONE	43
ACT THREE, SCENE TWO	49
ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE	56
ACT FOUR, SCENE TWO	60
ACT FIVE, SCENE ONE	61
FURTHER PRACTICAL WORK ON AND AROUND THE TEXT	67

# Extract

*PRELIMINARY NOTES: As with all the Plays Through Practice, it is important that all students have read the play before working through the following practical approaches. If the language of the play is too off-putting for a full read-through before starting work, then, at least, everyone should have read the character studies and the plot break-down given earlier in this book. Throughout, the practical work assumes a certain level of knowledge of the play.*

*It is important that students keep full records of the practical work undertaken and any decisions made throughout.*

*I have tried not to dictate my own opinions or be proscriptive in any way throughout this study guide. It is important that each student comes to his/her own decisions throughout. It must also be recognised that interpretation choices I offer throughout are usually limited to two or three; students may well come up with other interpretations which, providing they make sense within the context of the play, is good.*

## **ACT ONE, SCENE ONE**

The scene opens with Theseus, Duke of Athens, and his bride-to-be, Hippolyta, four days before they are to celebrate their wedding. The impression they give is of great happiness, both totally in accord with the other. This unity is the yardstick against which the other relationships need to be judged.

Quickly, the pair are interrupted by Egeus and his sulking daughter, Hermia, with her boyfriend, Lysander and the man Egeus wants her to marry, Demetrius. Instantly we are shown relationships in contrast to the stature of Theseus's with his Queen-to-be. Theseus and Hippolyta are in balance; Egeus is not in balance with his rebellious daughter and, as revealed when they are alone on stage, neither are the two young lovers in balance in their relationship. They propose to elope rather than that Hermia should be forced to marry Demetrius.

Helena enters and moans to her friend Hermia that she loves Demetrius, though that love is not returned - again, a relationship that is out of balance. Hermia tells her that she and Lysander are going to elope, which will give Helena a chance with Demetrius. But Helena decides to tell Demetrius of the elopement instead, hoping to ingratiate herself with him. Perhaps then he will notice her.

To understand the ideas behind this scene - which like all Shakespeare's masterly opening scenes gives the audience all the seeds of plot and theme - we need to look at it first from an Elizabethan point-of-view. In those days, certain values were considered 'right' along with a view of the world and the placing of individuals within it. In addition, anything that occurs to upset the 'natural order' - which is to say, the order that is set down by God, or rather, more accurately, by the Church of that time, ever the interpreters of God's word - has dire consequences on the whole world. Anything that happens in one place on earth has a 'knock-on' effect everywhere else. And it is true of heaven and of hell too, both of which places were given a physical reality by the teachings of the Church.

An awareness of this inter-dependency between all aspects of life is crucial to the understanding of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream, and indeed of many other Shakespeare plays too. Thus we can have 'unnatural events' in the heavens - comets, terrible storms, etc. - telling those who know how to read the signs that something is wrong elsewhere in the natural order of things. The murders of Julius Caesar and of King Duncan in Macbeth are accompanied by comets, horses running wild and turning predator, and suchlike 'unnatural' phenomena. The harsh treatment of Lear in King Lear by his own daughters creates storms of terrible ferocity. There are no plays by Shakespeare that I can think of off-hand which do not have some reference somewhere to the natural order of things and what dire consequences occur if that order is upset. Shakespeare's writing is steeped in these ideas.

And like it or not - a bitter pill for modern womanhood - the natural order of the time as regards male/female relationships - is that men are supposed to 'rule' women, fathers should rule daughters. Thus in the balanced relationship shown between Theseus and Hippolyta there is harmony now, despite the fact that Hippolyta was a warrior Queen whom Theseus subdued in battle. Hippolyta as a warrior queen had been in defiance of all the laws of nature - dedicated to virginity [an unnatural state to all except nuns] as well as to war and hunting - the activities 'proper' to men. Now, though, she has been beaten in battle and has willingly given up her independence and subjugated herself to her husband's will. It is this willingness that shows she has reached 'balance' and is thus a yardstick for all the other women in the play, both mortal and divine.

In this idea of natural order, women are wild and emotional while men are reasonable. This is shown in its perfect state by Theseus and Hippolyta, where Theseus's reason holds Hippolyta's wild emotions in check, though all other relationships fall somewhat short of this ideal. Thus, Hermia is wilfully disobeying her father. Lysander and Hermia are shown carried away by emotion and the rashness of youth. Helena has reversed the roles and pursues Demetrius. Titania is defying her husband Oberon.

Add to this mix the idea of world order - that whatever happens in one area of life will have repercussions in other areas - and we see that the fact that the 'gods' of the play - Titania and Oberon - have fallen out has caused repercussions in the world of men. For a time, everything is a muddle as the natural order falls apart, from the top down, until the two godlike fairies are reconciled and the tangles are straightened out.

Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a light-hearted comedy Shakespeare does not burden us with heavy-handed displays of the modern Elizabethan world order: God presiding over his Angels as the King or Queen [Elizabeth 1 when this play was written] presides over his/her people, in strict order from monarch to nobles down to the lowest peasant. Instead he takes the world of the play into a mythical time in Greece with a King [Theseus] and Queen far-removed in time, and gods - which is what Oberon and Titania more properly are - and spirits of nature closer to what the people of that time would have worshipped. Nonetheless, the parallels are there. What happens in the world of the spirits - gods, fairies, whatever you call them - profoundly affects the world of humans, but only where those humans have laid themselves open by rocking the boat of the natural order through their own actions.

This rather long aside was necessary to set the platform from which the play springs. There is no reason why a modern director cannot slant certain things to accord with more modern view-points, but should he do so I feel it is important that he does this knowingly and that he is aware where certain twists would distort the play beyond recognition. Beyond a certain point it is impossible to ignore the messages inherent in the whole structure of the play. A director can decide to cast a wry, even a humorous slant on the idea that men have to keep the excesses of women in check, but he cannot ignore that aspect of the play without altering it unacceptably. There are many times throughout our working through of the practical aspects of the play where you will have to come face-to-face with this and make your own decisions as to how to cope with it.

Now to confront the text. Usually in the *Plays Through Practice* series we start with collecting clues as to design and particularly setting. In the case of this play, start by considering how Shakespeare would have done it. **Set tasks for the students to do in small groups, each to feed back information on:**

**What sort of location the play was written for [ probably a nobleman's wedding, meaning that performance would be in a Great Hall or similar- not a formal stage at all.]**

**How setting was usually coped with in this period. There are a large number of scenes in the play - how would these have been done? Ask them to back their findings up by reference to the known stages of the time - the Swan, the Globe...**

**What kind of costumes would have been worn by the players in**

**Shakespeare's day? See if they can find any evidence from the internet or elsewhere. Does this give a clue as to how the fairies might be treated, for example?**

One of the choices any director has is to perform the play in conditions as close to Shakespeare's as possible. If this is the decision you make, then you must be prepared to justify your reasons for it. For the purposes of the examination, unless there are very cogent reasons for performing the play without setting of any kind, then it is probably best to come up with an imaginative and practicable, as well as soundly justified, setting that serves the needs of the play and the themes you choose to emphasise.

**With that in mind, start by reading the first scene deducing where it takes place and its period in history. Later on, at the end of the scene, there may be other things you will want to add to this list - for instance, furniture or levels to emphasise the status of certain people, or to allow areas of the performance space for different groups of characters. At this stage, there is no point in going any further. The idea here is to keep a running list of ideas and the different places suggested by the text. At the end, all these ideas will be gathered together with a view to deciding what must be discarded and what can be utilised within the finished design.**

**Looking at the period and characters within this scene, what style of costume springs to mind? Can you come up with rough [but clear] sketches of an example of these - both male and female? As with set design, I would expect costumes will go through many sea-changes before you settle on the look you want - both suggestive of atmosphere and theme.**

Many years ago, when I directed this play, I added a kind of masque-like Prologue before the play began, in which Theseus and Hippolyta were pin-pointed by light, as it were in the thick of battle - which battle had been created by sound all around the audience. They fought in slow-motion neither prevailing. This was useful to suggest more equality between the sexes. I wanted to show that the battle of the sexes had been a fair one, as evenly matched as may be. In the heat of battle, we showed the mounting of desire, of mutual attraction between the two contestants. Thus it turned from a potentially 'heavy' entree, into something lighter. The pants and harsh breaths of the fight became the ragged breaths of their mutual attraction and with wry smiles they put away their weapons and helped each other up, their eyes fixed on each other to keep up the idea of their growing attraction for each other. At this point the action froze - the lights changed to indicate the passing of time, attendants robed Hippolyta and the first scene began.

This moved easily into the signs of impatience for each other indicated in the first speeches and kept the idea of balance and rationality, without introducing the idea that a woman has to be dominated for there to be harmony.

Equally, a director wanting to make a different point might manipulate the prologue fight to show more force on the side of Theseus, perhaps, and that Hippolyta is a token to him: a symbol of male dominance, made all the more potent because of the Amazon's dedication to Artemis, the Virgin Goddess. In other words, Hippolyta's subjugation by Theseus becomes more than just male dominance; it also becomes an act of defilement, little more than a ritual rape - of Hippolyta's beliefs and vows - under the guise of marriage.

**I have mentioned this because I think that before even starting this play a would-be director needs to think through the symbolic position of the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. What did it mean to be an Amazon female warrior, dedicated to Artemis? Are there any signs of this warlike lady in the**

**Hippolyta as shown in the play? How open to interpretation could the relationship be? And - most importantly - how will the whole play be affected by the choices you make? Discuss this in your group, fully.**

**You may want to try out the 'prologues' to help you:**

**As described above, the focus being on equality and mutual feeling for each other**

**As suggested second, the focus being to show the complete subjugation of Hippolyta**

**A further idea - where the focus is on a marriage of 'good sense'. That is - the female warriors, the Amazons, have been beaten in battle and the two leaders decide to avoid further bloodshed between the two 'nations' by uniting the two in marriage. For this, you could have a movement prologue of many pairs, men and women battling, perhaps in slow motion. As Theseus subdues Hippolyta, he raises her up, respectfully. The fighting around them ceases, men and women standing together in accord - perhaps reluctantly at first.**

I am not suggesting that a prologue of this type is a necessary addition [though of course you are free to do such a thing if you want]. But I am suggesting that doing such an exercise as preliminary work might open up ideas and start everyone off on the right footing - that is, experimentally, and with an eye to the themes and debates within the play and how to make these visual and stimulating to actors and designers and, through them, to an audience.

At this stage, I would not suggest that you fix things in stone [though you may already have preferences] but keep experimental throughout the study of the play, only making your mind up and gathering threads together to check for a consistency of style and interpretation at the end.

## **ENTER THESEUS, HIPPOLYTA, PHILOSTRATE AND ATTENDANTS.**

The first few lines show a short dialogue between Theseus and Hippolyta. But before this they enter. They are not alone. Rulers seldom are. What does this tell us about the tone and intent of these speeches? Are they spoken out loud, to a public? Are they totally oblivious to servants so speak in front of them as if they were alone? Or does Theseus take Hippolyta aside and create an intimate moment with her, apart from their following?

In a moment, try out the implications of all these ideas - but first, look at the meaning of the first two speeches.

Theseus announces that the marriage is now only four days away, at the time of the new moon, considered a lucky time for weddings. The waning moon was considered unlucky, so that is why they are waiting. Theseus deplors the wait, stating his impatience and talking of his desire for her.

Hippolyta answers that the time will pass quickly.

The central imagery of the play is introduced: Theseus is a creature of the day, ruled by the sun, a masculine symbol whilst Hippolyta is a creature of the moon, a feminine symbol and also the symbol for Artemis to whom, as an Amazon, she was dedicated. The night is ruled by the moon, is feminine, a place where dreams happen; it is unpredictable, changeable - as the moon itself changes its shape throughout the month's cycle. Things go haywire in this play at night, under the light of the moon. But when day returns, and Theseus, symbol of the day, enters the wood, all is sorted out and the shadows of the night are dispersed. Thus, the sun dominates the moon as male

dominates female, and undoubtedly, this is how Shakespeare and others of his period would have seen things.

**Try the speeches out in the following ways:**

**For Theseus:**

- i. playing to the public - that is, saying the things that would be expected of him**
- ii. eagerly, having seized a private moment with her, betraying a real longing and passion**
- iii. teasingly, sounding her out, unsure of her response**
- iv. teasingly, sure of her response**

**For Hippolyta:**

- i. calming him down, the tone reassuring and loving**
- ii. full of eagerness for the wedding, the speech geared towards 'And then... the night of our solemnities.'**
- iii. indifferently**

The speeches can take any of these interpretations [and more], but which do you think most likely? Which response from Hippolyta goes with which opening from Theseus? How will your voice or how the speeches are delivered affect the movement of the characters, both in their distance from each other and in individual gestures?

These are the kind of questions you need to be asking of yourselves throughout the work on this play. I shall not always spell them all out. For instance, if you decide that the opening is a public display, gestures are going to be more flamboyant and 'stagey' and the distance between the two may be formal. A private moment may include more intimacy of gesture and physical closeness.

For the moment, go with the decisions you like best. Just remember that these decisions will affect the whole play, and check back at the end for consistency.

The next speech of Theseus's is a public one. He orders Philostrate to rouse the people to rejoice with them and to celebrate the joyousness of this wedding. But the last quartet, to Hippolyta, could be said in more intimate vein. **Try it:**

- sincerely, even with a sense of wonder that she loved him despite the 'injuries' he caused her**
- respectfully, making great emphasis of his promise, since he has won her agreement, not yet her love. The word 'love' said with an edge of pleading.**
- masterfully, a ruler through and through, an ironic hesitation before the word 'love'.**

What we are doing is keeping the three main possible interpretations open - true love; a marriage of convenience to keep things in balance; the dominant male.

## **ENTER EGEUS, HERMIA, LYSANDER AND DEMETRIUS**

Egeus is a hard character for modern tastes. His attitude that Hermia should marry Demetrius because he, her father, wills it, or else, as the custom is, her disobedience should result in her death is unacceptable to our tastes. Theseus makes clear that there is another option for disobedient daughters: to become a nun, but the choices are still very hard.

Theseus gives the accepted view: that fathers know best for their daughters and their say-so should be unquestioned. A Shakespearian audience may have viewed this altercation with more sympathy for Egeus, but the play has such a young feel to it that it is hard not to see Hermia in a very sympathetic light and not to read in Shakespeare's words something of that sympathy too.

How he does this is to make Egeus unbending in his opinion. Egeus gives no real reasons for his preference for Demetrius; he prefers Demetrius just because he does and he is the sort of man who will not change his mind once it is made up. Perhaps