

Language Politics



Shakespeare shapes his characters as much by how they speak as through what they say and do. The characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are no exception: the Athenian court, the lovers, the fairies and the Mechanicals all have their own way of speaking, even though they occasionally change this to fit the mood of the scene:

The lovers speak predominantly in rhyming couplets, while the Athenian court rather uses blank verse (i.e. iambic pentameter that does not rhyme). The fairies' language is characterised by a different vocabulary that draws on words and images from nature and is highly evocative. In contrast to these high status or supernatural characters, the Mechanicals speak the prose Shakespeare often reserved for the comic characters in his early plays. In addition, they often mix up words – a habit known as malapropism – and they end up speaking nonsense. In the final scene of the play the Athenians make fun of the Mechanicals and their performance also because of the way they speak.

Think about how you could perform this final scene with the groups speaking different languages or dialects:



Do you think a particular language fits better to the courtly speech? Is one particularly fitting for the fairies, another one ideal for the Mechanicals? What makes you think so? Discuss your ideas with each other.



Is there a certain language that is considered to be more prestigious than others? Do you speak certain languages or dialects in certain contexts only, for example at home, or on special occasions?



Roughly translate the scene into your languages and perform it. If you want to go one step further, allocate the 'wrong' language to the 'wrong' group and perform it this way around.

Pyramus and Thisbe

Roles

| | |
|-------------|-----------|
| Philostrate | Thisbe |
| Theseus | Wall |
| Hippolyta | Moonshine |
| Lysander | Lion |
| Quince | Oberon |
| Pyramus | Titania |

Philostrate. So please your grace, the Prologue is addressed.

Theseus. Let him approach.

Flourish of trumpets; enter QUINCE.

Quince. If we offend, it is with our good will.

That you should think, we come not to offend,
But with good will. To show our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end.

Lysander. He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt; he knows not the stop.

Hippolyta. Indeed he hath played on his prologue like a child on a recorder; a sound, but not in government.

Enter Pyramus and Thisbe, Wall, Moonshine, and Lion.

Quince. Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show;

But wonder on, till truth make all things plain.
This man is Pyramus, if you would know;
This beauteous lady Thisby is certain.
This man, with lime and rough-cast, doth present
Wall, that vile Wall which did these lovers sunder;
And through Wall's chink, poor souls, they are content
To whisper.

(Wall spreads his fingers so that Pyramus and Thisbe can whisper through it.)

Quince. At the which let no man wonder.

This man, with lanthorn, dog, and bush of thorn,
Presenteth Moonshine; for, if you will know,
By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn
To meet at Ninus' tomb, there, there to woo.

Moonshine. This lanthorn doth the horned moon present;
Myself the man i' the moon do seem to be.

Quince. This grisly beast, which Lion hight by name,
The trusty Thisby, coming first by night,
Did scare away, or rather did affright;
(Lion roars and Thisbe runs off, leaving her cloak behind.)

Quince. And, as she fled, her mantle she did fall,
Which Lion vile with bloody mouth did stain.
(Lion bloodies the cloak.)

Quince. Anon comes Pyramus, sweet youth and tall,
And finds his trusty Thisby's mantle slain:
Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast;
(He kills himself theatrically with his sword.)

Pyramus. Thus die I, thus, thus, thus.
Now die, die, die, die, die.
(Thisbe discovers the dead Pyramus.)

Quince. And Thisby, tarrying in mulberry shade,
His dagger drew, and died.

Thisbe. Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
(She takes Pyramus' sword and kills herself too.)

Theseus. Moonshine and Lion are left to bury the dead.
Exeunt Quince, Wall, Thisbe, Lion, Moonshine and Pyramus
Enter OBERON and TITANIA.

Oberon. Through the house give gathering light,
By the dead and drowsy fire:
Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier;
And this ditty, after me,
Sing, and dance it trippingly.

Titania. First, rehearse your song by rote
To each word a warbling note:
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing, and bless this place.

Vocabulary

to address (v.) – to be ready (obsolete meaning)

rid (v.) – past tense of to ride

colt (n.) – a young male horse

stop (n.) – (in managing a horse) pulling-up

recorder (n.) – a wooden musical instrument that is shaped like a tube with holes and that is played by blowing into the top of the tube

in government – in control

perchance – perhaps (old-fashioned)

plain (adj.) – simple

beauteous (adj.) – beautiful

lime and rough-cast – material used to cover walls

vile (adj.) – evil

to do sunder (v.) – to split up, to part (old-fashioned)

chink (n.) – a small crack : a narrow opening or space

lanthorn (n.) – variant spelling for lantern

to think no scorn (v.) – not to consider it beneath one's dignity

grisly (adj.) – causing horror or fear

hight (adj.) – is called (obsolete)

to affright (v.) – to frighten

mantle (n.) – cloak

to stain (v.) – to leave a mark on something

anon (adv.) – soon, shortly

to broach (v.) – to pierce

to tarry (v.) – to linger, to stay behind

sprite (n.) – spirit

brier (n.) – a wild plant that has many thorns on its branches

ditty (n.) – a short and simple song

by rote (adj.) – learning something by repeating it many times

to warble (v.) – to sing a song that has many different notes