

# Play within a play in a midsummer night's dream

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



William Shakespeare frequently used his literary works to make statements on social issues. A Midsummer Night's Dream obviously addresses the conflict between men and women by portraying several relationships, father and daughter, husband and wife, in which the man tries to exert his will upon the woman. Shakespeare chose to use an interesting perspective in A Midsummer Night's Dream, presenting a play within a play to portray different endings to similar conflicts between father and daughter, one tragic, one happy. Shakespeare's use of Pyramus and Thisbe within A Midsummer Night's Dream also allowed him to make important statements about the drama genre in his time (Smith N. Pag.). A Midsummer Night's Dream may be among the most whimsical of Shakespeare's works, but he wound together powerful statements on two diverse subjects in an extraordinarily adroit manner. Shakespeare used the play Pyramus and Thisbe within the play A Midsummer Night's Dream to comment on the position of theater during his time, which was often subject to the will and whim of both church and state, and frequently threatened with censorship. It is important to recognize the history of theater to understand the status of theater during the Renaissance. Traditionally, theater had been an entity of the church, which offered miracle and mystery plays on holy days as a way of educating the public in the history and teachings of the church, rather than as entertainment. As theater became more public, and subjects other than church history began to appear, the church and the state both objected sternly and attempted to control the theater, enacting laws to maintain control of performers and playwrights. Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) was a supporter of drama and attempted to pave the way for its growth, both by

being a patron to the art in London, and in 1559, by entreating mayors in her realm to license plays (Child N. Pag.). It is, in fact, widely accepted that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* expressly to be performed at a wedding attended by Queen Elizabeth (Smith N. Pag.). In 1572 companies of actors that were not attached to noblemen's houses were declared "rogues and vagabonds" (Wilson N. Pag.). The Protestant reformation was under way, and with the beginnings of Puritanical leanings, drama was deemed unethical and immoral. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, widely held to have been written in the mid 1590's, provided Shakespeare a venue for stating to the public that drama by its very nature was not real, that it was entertainment, which coincidentally addressed issues of ethics and morality. In his play, Shakespeare used both audience and actors of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to comment on drama. Shakespeare introduces the actors of *Pyramus and Thisbe* early in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and uses their dialogue to demonstrate the importance of drama to the common man, as well as their fear of censorship. In the First Act, Scene Two, a group of tradesmen are introduced. These fellows are very excited to have the opportunity to perform an interlude at the wedding of Theseus, a duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. Shakespeare has taken care in this scene to show by the earnestness of these tradesmen that they take this performance seriously, but also uses their conversation concerning the assignment of roles to point out the consequences of censorship. Bottom, the weaver, and by far the most outgoing of the troupe, offers to play the lion. He will, he states, "roar so that it will do any man's heart good" (Durband Act I, Scene 2), to which the carpenter Quince, as director, replies

that if Bottom were to play the lion too realistically, frightening the ladies present, it would “ have us all hanged” (Durband Act I, Scene 2). Even though the presentation here is humorous, Shakespeare is commenting on the reality of censorship by the government, and the seriousness of the repercussions of such censorship. The following evening the troupe meets in the woods to rehearse their performance, and again Shakespeare satirizes the censorship prevalent at the time. The actors decide they must incorporate prologues in their performance that explain to the audience in plain language that this is fiction, that they are play-acting, and that there is no actual violence or bloodshed. At the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, Shakespeare shares comments from the audience, Theseus and members of his entourage, about these prologues. He uses these conversations to point out the humor of the situation in which the actors find it necessary to explain every step of the play so that the audience understands that the purpose of their performance, and by association of the entire genre of drama, is to entertain, not to frighten or offend. Shakespeare’s sarcasm rings clearly throughout the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe in Act 5, Scene 1 of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, with comments such as made by Demetrius to Theseus, “ A lion can speak if so many asses can” (Durband Act 5, Scene I.),” expressing Shakespeare’s opinion of the standing of church and government on the theater. Shakespeare closes A Midsummer Night’s Dream with only Puck on stage, and a soliloquy that reinforces the satirical comments about theater made throughout the play by encouraging the audience, if offended, to think of the performance as “... nothing better than a dream...” (Durband Act 5, Scene I.). This comment is telling in and of itself, in that it seems that

Shakespeare feels a need to apologize to his audience for his sarcasm, but finds it necessary to comment on the political pressures prevalent at the time to do away with theater as an art. Although the obvious overall theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love, and conflict between the sexes, Shakespeare cleverly intertwined a powerful statement about the genre he loved and its fragile standing in English society. Persecution of the theater and actors continued throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, and while he was blessed to have had the support of both Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James (Child N. Pag.), he was a member of a very small minority.

Shakespeare presented an astute foresight in his comments presented in the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as shortly after his death the theater in London as he knew it was indeed closed down. Works Cited Child, Harold. "The Elizabethan Theater." *The Drama to 1642, Part Two*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907-1921. Vol. 6 of *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*. 18 Vols. Ward & Trent, et al. Gen. Ed. New York: Bartleby. com, 2000. 17 November 2003.. Phillips, Brian. SparkNote on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 2003. Sparknotes. com 17 November 2003.. Durband, Alan. Ed. *Shakespeare Made Easy: A Midsummer Night's Dream*. New York: Barron's Educational Series. 1985. Smith, J. N. Classic Note on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 1 January 2000. Gradesaver. com. 17 November 2003.. Wilson, J. Dover. "The Puritan Attack upon the Stage." *The Drama to 1642, Part Two*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907-1921. Vol. 6 of *The Cambridge History of English And American Literature*. 18 Vols. Ward & Trent, et al. Gen. Ed. New York: Bartleby. com, 2000. 17 November 2003..