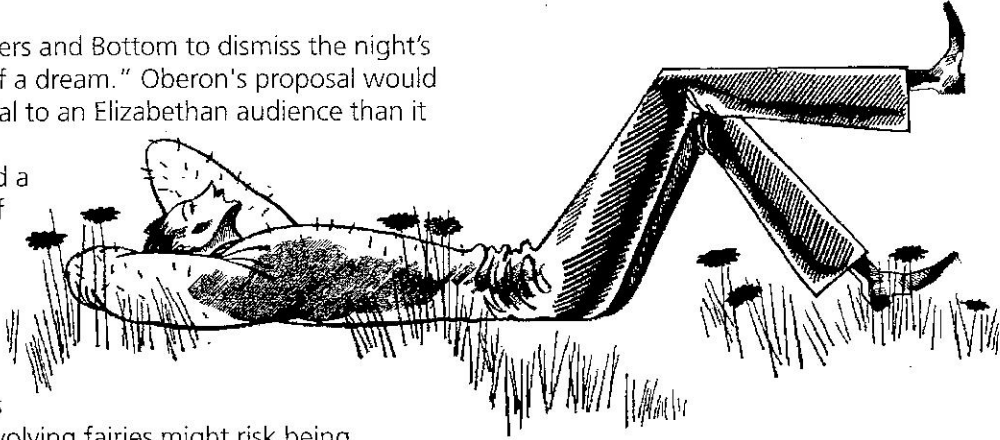


Act Four

Only a Dream?

Oberon wants the Athenian lovers and Bottom to dismiss the night's events as "the fierce vexation of a dream." Oberon's proposal would have sounded more controversial to an Elizabethan audience than it would to a modern one. Many Elizabethans would have judged a disturbing dream as evidence of the devil at work. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians argued that the devil used dreams to deceive people and lure them into sinful acts. Someone who reported dreams of a sexual nature or dreams involving fairies might risk being accused of witchcraft. Bottom has good reason to hold back the details of his "dream" from his friends.



"The Music of My Hounds"

Hunting was a popular sport among wealthy Elizabethans. Aristocrats often owned private parks where they had exclusive hunting rights. (A rumor surfaced after Shakespeare's death that he originally left Stratford because he was caught poaching deer in such a park.) Like Theseus, English hunters took pride in the harmonious sound of their dog packs. They would select hounds as one might select instruments for an orchestra, making sure to include a full range of barkers.

Bottom and the Bible

When he tries to describe his "dream" after waking up, Bottom paraphrases a passage from the Bible. Saint Paul says that scripture teaches "the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). He cautions that spiritual wisdom will sound absurd to the nonbeliever. Bottom alludes to this passage because he realizes how absurd his experience will sound to others. He manages to pile absurdity upon absurdity as he mixes up the function of sense organs: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was."

LITERARY CONCEPT

Characterization

Characterization refers to the techniques a writer uses to develop characters. Shakespeare never directly describes characters or comments on their behavior. He develops a character through his or her speeches and actions and also through the comments of other characters. For example, in Act Three, Robin describes Bottom as the "shallowest thick-skin" of his group. We get a different view of Bottom in Act Four, where the craftsmen admire his acting and pleasant voice. Shakespeare increases the complexity of his characterization by reminding us that judgments about behavior are often subjective. Bottom's lower-class friends find him charming, but he seems clumsy to the sophisticates in the courts of Oberon and Theseus.

BEFORE READING

You might want to distribute

FVI p. 31, *Glossary*, pp. 37–38

• *Strategic Reading 4*, p. 41

• *Literary Concepts 1–3*, pp. 44–46

ACT FOUR

AFTER READING

Discussion Starters

1. What are your thoughts about the resolution of the conflict among the four Athenian lovers? Describe your reaction in a sentence or two.
2. Do you think Demetrius's love for Helena will last? Why or why not?
3. How do you think Oberon feels about the trick he has played on Titania?

CONSIDER

- ✓ what he says about her behavior
- ✓ what he says about Bottom
- ✓ his possession of the Indian boy

4. How much of the night's events do you think Bottom recalls after he awakens? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
5. **Literary Concept: Characterization** Characterization refers to the techniques that writers use to develop characters. Find at least two examples of comments that characters make about Bottom in Act Four. How do these comments influence your impression of Bottom?
6. **Making Connections** Think of a time when you changed your opinion of someone. Did you, like Demetrius, have a hard time explaining the change in your feelings? Why or why not?

Writing Prompt

Imagine you are Titania. Write a **diary entry** about your encounter with Bottom.