

Act Three

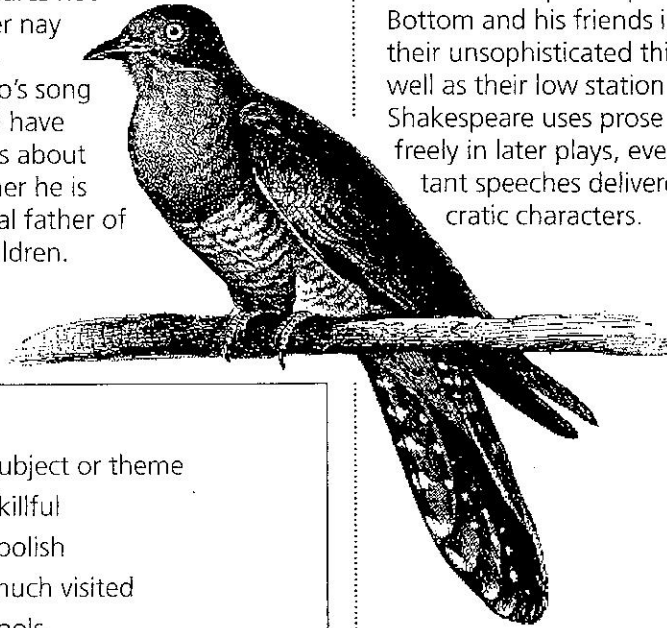
ACT 3

“Cues and All”

When an Elizabethan play was ready for production, the company scrivener copied out the scripts for individual actors. Each actor received a “part,” or script, with only that actor’s lines and cues (a few words from the line preceding a speech to signal the actor when to begin). If an actor wanted a better sense of the whole play, he could look at a summary of the plot that was tacked up backstage. Besides being economical, this system made it more difficult for dishonest printers to get hold of complete scripts and publish unauthorized editions of plays. Perhaps Shakespeare had suffered through rehearsals similar to the one in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where a confused Flute speaks his part all at once, “cues and all.”

The Cuckoo’s Song

What does Bottom mean when he sings about the “plainsong cuckoo gray, / Whose note full many a man doth mark / And dares not answer nay”? Most cuckoo birds lay their eggs in the nests of other bird species. The “foster parents” are therefore tricked into hatching and feeding the baby cuckoos. The cry of the cuckoo was traditionally thought to mock cuckolds—men whose wives were unfaithful. A man who dares not answer nay to the cuckoo’s song would have doubts about whether he is the real father of his children.



Poetry Is Definitely High Class

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the craftsmen speak in prose except when they are reciting lines from “Pyramus and Thisbe.” The other characters usually speak in verse. This distinction between prose and verse is traditionally used in Elizabethan plays to emphasize differences in social rank. Verse is dignified speech appropriate to gentlemen and ladies, not manual laborers. The prose spoken by Bottom and his friends indicates their unsophisticated thinking as well as their low station in life. Shakespeare uses prose much more freely in later plays, even for important speeches delivered by aristocratic characters.

VOCABULARY

Elizabethan Words That Mean Something Different Today

argument	subject or theme
artificial	skillful
fond	foolish
haunted	much visited
patches	fools
toward	about to begin
translated	transformed

BEFORE READING

You might want to distribute



p. 30, Glossary, pp. 37–38

- Strategic Reading 3, p. 41
- Literary Concepts 1–3, pp. 44–46

ACT THREE

AFTER READING

Discussion Starters

1. Who are your favorite characters up to this point in the play? Explain your choices.
2. Why do you think Helena assumes that Demetrius, Lysander, and Hermia have conspired against her?

CONSIDER

- ✓ their previous behavior toward her
- ✓ how she feels about herself
- ✓ her betrayal of Hermia's and Lysander's secret

3. The critic R. W. Dent says that "in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the origin of love never lies in reason." What explanations do you think the play offers for the origins of love, based on the action so far?
4. If you were directing this drama, how would you want the actor to play the role of Bottom? Think about Bottom's personality and use of language, based on what you have learned about him in his scenes.
5. **Literary Concept: Irony** Irony is a contrast between what is expected and what actually exists or happens. Find an example of irony in this act. What do you think this irony suggests about love or lovers?
6. How would you describe the relationship between Oberon and Robin?

CONSIDER

- ✓ the tasks Oberon has Robin perform
- ✓ what Oberon says about Robin
- ✓ how Robin responds to Oberon

7. **Making Connections** If Robin were going on a job search today, what do you think would be a good career for him? Give reasons for your choice.

Writing Prompt

You are a gossip columnist for the *Fairyland Tribune*. Write a **newspaper column** about Titania's infatuation with Bottom and Oberon's role in the affair.