

# Act Two

## “A Shrewd and Knavish Sprite”

Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, belongs to an ancient tradition of popular belief in spirits and witches. Shakespeare probably based his character on descriptions in a book about witchcraft that Reginald Scott published in 1584. Scott says that housewives traditionally set out bread and a bowl of milk for Robin; in exchange, he would grind their malt and mustard or sweep the house at night. Despite this helpful behavior, Robin was generally feared for his trickery and his ability to change shape.

## Fairy Tales

Fairies supposedly resemble people but are much smaller. These supernatural beings have magical powers, including the ability to become invisible. Some fairies are said to live in a community known as fairyland. Others secretly live in human households, where they perform useful chores. Fairies have a darker side to their reputation, such as their habit of stealing human children from homes and leaving fairy children in their place. The stolen children and the fairy substitutes are called “changelings.”

Although no actor could be as small as the fairies described in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, many directors have emphasized the playful innocence of Shakespeare's fairies by casting children in these roles. Oberon and Titania, however, are usually played by adults.

### LITERARY CONCEPT

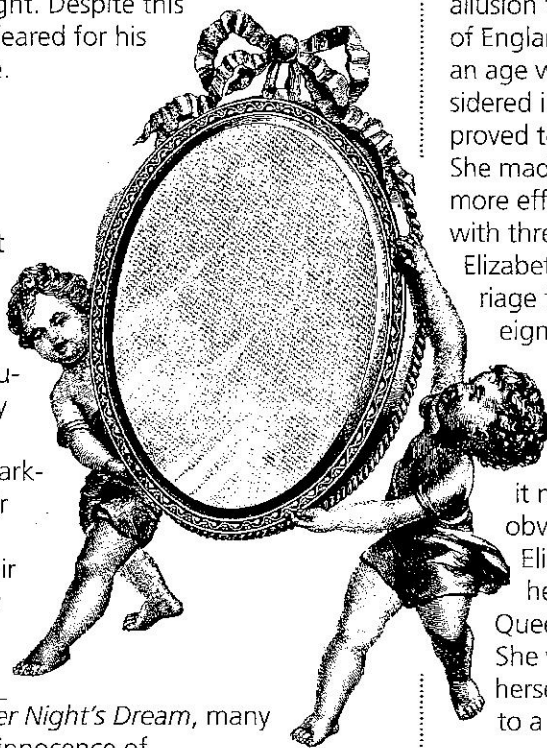
## Imagery

Imagery is the use of words and phrases to re-create vivid sensory experiences for the reader or audience. Most images are visual, but imagery can also appeal to the senses of smell, hearing, taste, and touch. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare relies on imagery to dramatize the play's fairyland setting and characters. For example, he gives us a sense of fairy stature by describing how they “Creep into acorn cups” to hide.

## This Queen Flies Solo

Oberon describes a “fair vestal, throned by the west” who narrowly escapes being hit by Cupid's arrow. Most scholars agree that this passage is a complimentary allusion to Elizabeth I, the Queen of England from 1558 to 1603. In an age when women were considered inferior to men, Elizabeth proved to be a remarkable leader. She made English government more efficient and dealt skillfully with threats against the nation.

Elizabeth refused offers of marriage from aristocrats and foreign kings, probably because she was reluctant to give up power. Many people complained about her unmarried status, since it meant there would be no obvious heir to the throne. Elizabeth, however, used her image as the Virgin Queen to great advantage. She was fond of describing herself as being married not to a man but to her kingdom.



## BEFORE READING

You might want to distribute

**FYI** p. 29, *Glossary*, pp. 37–38

• *Strategic Reading 2*, p. 40

• *Literary Concepts 1–3*, pp. 44–46

## ACT TWO

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Starters

1. What mental pictures did you form of Oberon, Titania, Robin, and the fairy world?
2. What do you think is going to happen now that Robin has mistakenly given the love potion to Lysander instead of Demetrius?
3. Whose side, if anyone's, did you take in the dispute between Oberon and Titania about the Indian boy? Explain your reasoning.

### CONSIDER

- ✓ Titania's friendship with the boy's mother
- ✓ Oberon's jealousy of the boy
- ✓ the accusations they make about one another
- ✓ the harmful effects of their quarrel

4. What similarities can you find among the various characters in the play? Use examples to support your opinion.
5. Think about the various love relationships presented thus far in the play. Which of these relationships do you think is the most sensible? Which is the least sensible? Explain your reasoning.
6. **Literary Concept: Imagery** Imagery is the use of vivid words and phrases to re-create sensory experiences for the reader or audience. Choose a passage from Act Two that offers a striking example of imagery. What senses does the imagery appeal to? How does the imagery contribute to our understanding of the setting or characters?
7. **Making Connections** What are the "love potions" of our own time? That is, what items or commercial products are believed to have special powers that can help win romantic favors? Compare people's use of such items to the use of the love potion in the play.

### Writing Prompt

Imagine that you are Helena's close friend. Write a **dialogue** in which you advise her about how to deal with Demetrius.