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Study Guide

for

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare



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Meet William Shakespeare



He was not of an age, but for all time.

—Ben Jonson, poet and contemporary
of Shakespeare

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Little is known about William Shakespeare, generally acknowledged as the greatest playwright of all time. In some ways, the lack of information is ironically fitting. Whereas we can draw on personal history to understand and explain the work of most writers, in the case of Shakespeare, we must rely primarily on his work. His command of comedy and tragedy, his ability to depict the range of human character, and his profound insights into human nature add clues to the few facts that are known about his life.

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare, a successful glovemaker and public official, and Mary Arden, the daughter of a gentleman, William was the oldest surviving sibling of eight children.

Shakespeare probably attended the local grammar school and studied Latin. His writings indicate that he was familiar with classical

writers such as Ovid (the source for the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Throughout Shakespeare's childhood, companies of touring actors visited Stratford. Although there is no evidence to prove that Shakespeare ever saw these actors perform, most scholars agree that he probably did.

In 1582, at the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. The couple had become parents of two daughters and a son by 1585. Sometime in the next eight years, Shakespeare left his family in Stratford and moved to London to pursue a career in the theater. Records show that by 1592, he had become a successful actor and playwright in that city.

Although an outbreak of plague forced the London theaters to close in 1592, Shakespeare continued to write, producing the long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* and a number of comedies. By 1594 the plague was less of a threat, and theaters reopened. Shakespeare had joined a famous acting group called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, so named for their patron, or supporter, a high official in the court of Queen Elizabeth I. One of the first plays Shakespeare wrote for this company was *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1598 Shakespeare became part owner of a major new theater, the Globe.

For more than a decade, Shakespeare produced a steady stream of works, both tragedies and comedies, which were performed at the Globe, the royal court, and other London theaters. However, shortly after the Globe was destroyed by fire in 1613, he retired and returned to Stratford.

Fairly wealthy from the sales of his plays and from his shares in both the acting company and the Globe, Shakespeare was able to buy a large house and an impressive amount of property. He died in Stratford in 1616. Seven years later the first collection of his plays was published.

Introducing the Play

The opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leads the audience to expect an ordinary comedy plot.

—René Girard, "Myth and Ritual in Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not always do exactly what we might expect, and in this way it keeps its audience guessing . . .

—Catherine Belsey, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Modern Perspective"

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* toward the beginning of his career. The play describes the comic misadventures of two pairs of lovers who become lost in a dark wood and fall under the power of sprites.

To Shakespeare's audiences, the play's title was a clue that the play might be about romance, magic, and madness. Midsummer Night was thought to be one of the nights of the year when sprites were especially powerful. People also believed that flowers gathered on Midsummer Night could work magic and that Midsummer Night was a time when people dreamed of their true loves and sometimes went insane.

Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists based their comedy plots on Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) models. Often a grumpy old father blocks the love affair between a young man and a young woman. Complications and confusions follow, until finally, after some dramatic reversal, the lovers are united. Setting his first act in Athens, the birthplace of Western classical literature, Shakespeare follows just such a plot. It is not long, however, before the play moves to the woods outside Athens, and into the English concept of Midsummer Night.

This tale of frustrated love and mistaken identity makes audiences laugh at the ridiculous ease with which lovers change the object of their affection, while still believing that their feelings are completely sincere. However, although it is a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also poses some profound and difficult questions: What is

love? How and why do people fall in and out of love? How is love related to questions of identity—both of the lover and the beloved? Are lovers in control of themselves and their destinies? Which is more real, the "daylight" world of reason and law or the "nighttime" world of passion and chaos? Shakespeare leaves these questions for the audience to answer.

THE TIME AND PLACE

Drama was tremendously popular during Shakespeare's lifetime. The queen herself, Elizabeth I, loved to watch plays—including many by Shakespeare—in her court. Companies of actors traveled throughout England, performing for eager audiences. Over a short period of time, dramatic literature developed rapidly, from the slapstick plays popular during Shakespeare's youth to the complex dramas written by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Yet not everyone in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England loved plays and acting. Theater owners tried to avoid city authorities, many of whom disapproved of the theater because it drew large crowds, creating the potential for crime, the possible spread of disease, and the introduction of controversial ideas. Many local authorities mistrusted and persecuted visiting actors, which forced the actors to seek the protection of powerful nobles. Religious factions such as the Puritans decried acting as wicked and tried to outlaw it. In fact, the Puritans succeeded in closing down the theaters in 1642.

Many of Shakespeare's plays seem to address the issue of whether drama is mere entertainment or a vehicle for showing the truth of human experience. In the eyes of contemporary critic

Alvin B. Kernan:

Shakespeare seems to have constructed in Dream the "worst case" for theater, voicing all the attacks on drama being made in his time and deliberately showing plays, actors, and audiences at their worst.

A Midsummer Night's Dream contains a play-within-a-play, which features comically clumsy writing, poor staging, cheap costumes, and awful acting. Furthermore, Oberon, the fairy king, can be seen as a kind of mad director, stage managing the passions of others for his own amusement or pleasure.

Yet *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows us to laugh at human nature and observe the interaction

between actors and audience. *Pyramus and Thisbe*—the play-within-a-play—may be silly, but it is funny. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can also be seen as a tribute to the magic of illusion. After waking from their dream parts in Oberon's "play," Bottom, Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia all express a sense of wonder and bewilderment at their recent experience.

Did You Know?

Shakespeare wrote much of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and most of his plays, in a style called blank verse. This style was fairly new in the 1500s. Blank verse was first used in English drama in a play four years before Shakespeare was born. It follows a flexible rhythmic pattern consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Look, for example, at the lines that Hippolyta speaks to Theseus in act 1, scene 1:

*Four days will quickly steep
themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream
away the time;*

Most English verse, or poetry, falls naturally into this pattern. Prose, or ordinary, everyday language, was also becoming a popular dramatic writing style, frequently mixed with blank verse.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses different writing styles to suit different characters. For example, Bottom and his friends generally speak in prose, which gives them a simple, rustic quality. For the speeches of Oberon and Titania, Shakespeare uses a much more complex form of poetry, implying the exquisite beauty and magic of the fairy kingdom.

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Why do young people in love sometimes experience conflict with their parents?

Map It

What is the best way to resolve a conflict? Create a graphic organizer to show the six steps of problem solving listed below. Include ideas on how these steps might be applied to the first part of the **Focus Activity**.

1. identify the problem
2. determine the importance of the problem
3. identify and discuss options
4. agree on an option
5. act on your decision
6. evaluate your decision

Setting a Purpose

As you read act 1, note what dilemmas Theseus, Hermia, Lysander, and Helena face and how they decide to solve them.

BACKGROUND

Time and Place

Shakespeare borrowed the characters of Theseus and Hippolyta from Greek mythology. Theseus was the national hero of Athens. He was a friend of Heracles (Hercules) and the survivor of many adventures, including his slaying of the Minotaur, a creature half man and half bull. Hippolyta was Queen of the Amazons, a group of female warriors. Theseus took her prisoner and then married her.

Did You Know?

The Renaissance is the period of European history that began in Italy in the 1300s and spread throughout Europe over the next two centuries. The word renaissance means “rebirth,” and during the Renaissance there was a rebirth of interest in art, architecture, and learning based on Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) sources. Shakespearean scholars believe that Shakespeare read many English translations of works by Homer, Ovid, Horace, Apuleius, and other classical writers and was deeply influenced by some of them.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

austerity [ôs ter’ə tē] *n.* condition of lacking pleasure or luxury

beguile [bi gīl’] *v.* to trick

cloister [klois’ter] *n.* place where members of a religious community live

dote [dōt] *v.* to love with foolish fondness

extenuate [iks ten’ü ăt’] *v.* to lessen the seriousness of

feign [fān] *v.* to pretend

idolatry [ī dol’ə trē] *n.* false worship

reveling [rev’əl ing] *n.* enjoying festivities

Active Reading

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1

Identify Hermia's basic dilemma. What are the choices outlined for her by Theseus and her father? What other choice does Lysander suggest? Outline each option in the flowchart below.

Hermia's options according to:

Egeus

Obey him and marry
Demetrius

Theseus

Lysander

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1

Personal Response

How did you feel when you read Helena's decision to tell Demetrius about Hermia and Lysander's plan? Why did you feel this way?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why is Egeus angry with his daughter?

2. Why is Helena envious of Hermia?

3. How would you describe Bottom's acting ability? What is Bottom's own opinion of his acting ability?

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Describe Theseus's character. What sort of leader does he seem to be?

5. Do you think Egeus is justified in being angry with his daughter? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Moon Images

Act 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place in the daytime, but it contains many images of the moon that foreshadow the night to come. On a separate sheet of paper, identify the examples of moon imagery in act 1. Then, in a paragraph or two, analyze and explain the moods that the images suggest.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

The Athenian tradesmen who appear in scene 2 are broadly comic figures. Divide into small groups, and make a list of comic actors in the television or movie business today who could best play each part. Include the characteristics or qualities that make each actor perfect for each part. Share your cast list with the other groups, and take a class vote to decide which actor would be best cast in each part.

Learning for Life

How do you go about solving your problems or conflicts? Think of a conflict you have experienced in the past week or so. Review the graphic organizer you created in the **Focus Activity** on page 12. Then develop a plan for solving your problem by following the steps described in the graphic organizer. Make a brief outline of your plan on a separate sheet of paper.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 2

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How would you feel if someone you liked suddenly stopped liking you?

Journal

On a separate sheet of paper, jot down some of the feelings and reactions you might have toward someone whom you felt had stopped liking you.

Setting a Purpose

As you read act 2, follow the ins and outs of the relationships among the various characters.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Shakespeare did not create the character of Puck. Puck appears in many earlier works about magic and witchcraft. In some cases, he is presented as an evil goblin; in others he is merely naughty. Author Robert Burton (who lived a little later than Shakespeare) describes fire spirits who purposely mislead travelers: "We commonly call them pucks." Generally the character of Puck is not malicious, but rather intent on amusing himself at the expense of others.

Doubling

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare makes use of a literary technique called **doubling** to explore different sides of reality. For example, in act 1 he introduces the "daylight" queen and king, Hippolyta and Theseus. In act 2 he introduces the nighttime queen and king, Titania and Oberon, who can be seen as doubles of the first pair. Hermia and Helena are doubles in many ways—best friends who have been brought up together, and who are both frustrated in love. Even their names sound alike. As characters there is very little difference between Demetrius and Lysander. Both are simply young men in love. As you read, pay attention to elements or characters in one part of the play that repeat or reflect elements in another part.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

dissemble [di sem' bəl] *v.* to pretend

flout [flout] *v.* to mock

progeny [proj' ə nē] *n.* offspring

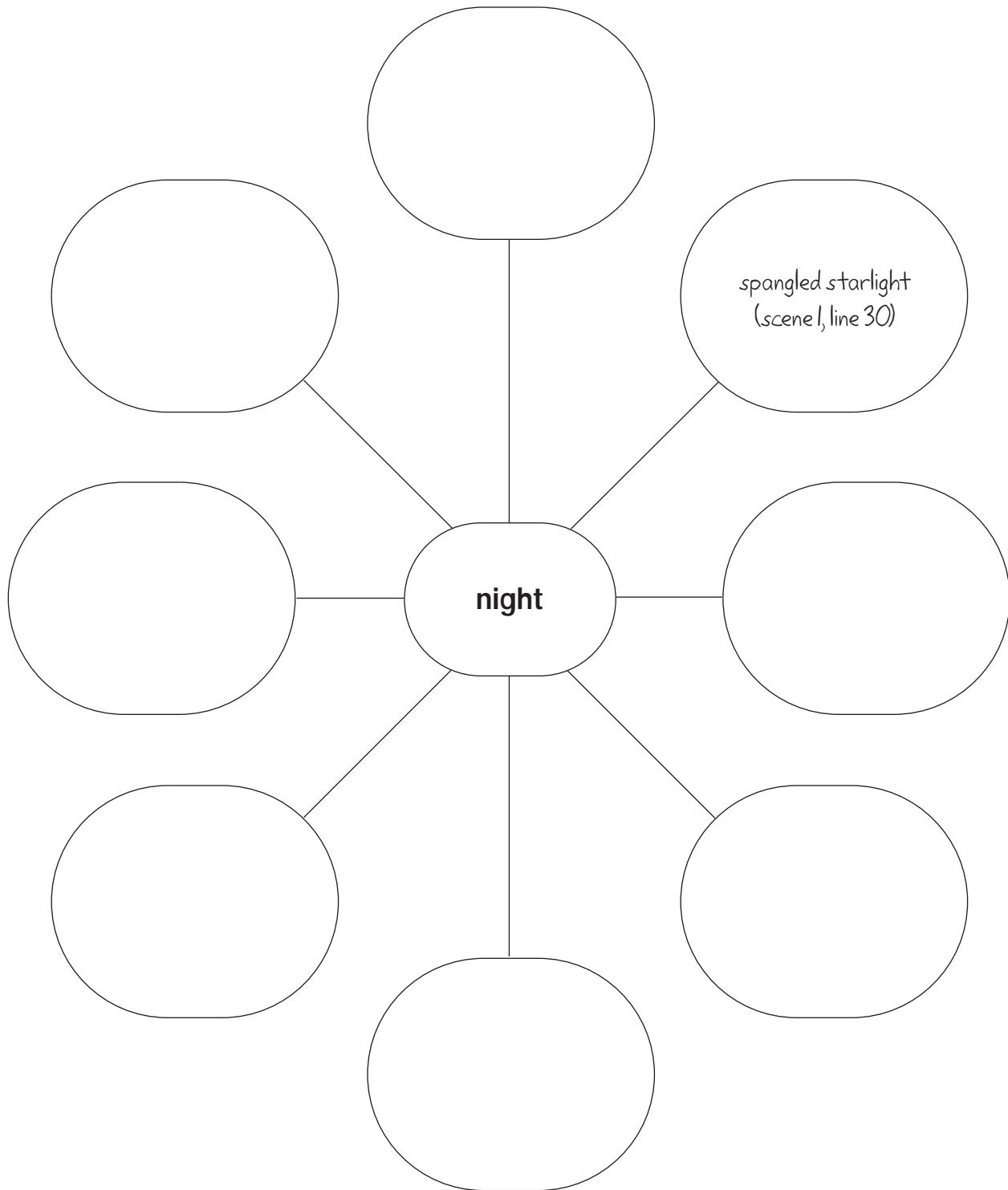
promontory [prom' ən tōr ē] *n.* peak of land that juts out

wanton [wont' ən] *adj.* shameless

Active Reading

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 2

As you read act 2, identify images related to night. Write them down on the web below. Add more circles if you need to.



Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 2

Personal Response

The sprites speak very poetically. Which image or images presented by the sprites do you remember the best? What makes the images memorable?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why are Oberon and Titania fighting?

2. How does Oberon intend to blackmail Titania into giving him what he wants?

3. By the end of act 2, what is similar about the following pairs: Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, and Oberon and Titania?

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 2

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. How would you describe the character of Puck? What kind of mood does he create?

5. How might the magical herb described by Oberon act as a metaphor for the way infatuation operates in real life? Explain.

Literature and Writing

Cause and Effect

Write a supernatural weather report. In your own words, describe one or more of the disastrous weather conditions around the world, such as a recent hurricane or earthquake. Then explain the cause in detail: the quarrel between Oberon and Titania. Review your **Focus Activity** on page 16 for thoughts on lovers' quarrels. Look into the future, and explain what has to change between Oberon and Titania for weather conditions to improve.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In act 2, Shakespeare sets up a number of unresolved situations. Identify these situations, and discuss various possible outcomes for each. Then take turns with other students predicting what will happen and why. Record your predictions. After finishing the play, return to your predictions and see how close you were to predicting the actual outcomes.

Sound Performance

In Shakespeare's time, the staging of plays was fairly simple, because theaters had few of the technological resources we have today. Productions of Shakespeare have constantly evolved to reflect the concerns and capabilities of modern producers. In small groups, imagine that you are in charge of putting together background sound (music, sound effects) for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Create a tape of music, electronic noises, or other sounds that you think would create the appropriate magical effect for act 2. Be as inventive as possible with your sounds. Play your tape for the rest of the class. Have students critique the tape, discussing what sounds are most effective in creating a magical mood.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Think of a time when you got so involved in a play or movie that you temporarily forgot that it was not real.

Share Experiences

Talk to other classmates and share examples of experiences when a play or movie made you forget the division between illusion and reality.

Setting a Purpose

As you read, pay attention to the games Shakespeare plays with illusion and reality.

BACKGROUND

Comedy or Tragedy?

One of the many lines Shakespeare blurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the one between comedy and tragedy. Bottom's actors rehearse a play about the legendary lovers Pyramus and Thisbe. The script and the performances by the mechanics are so silly that the play becomes a sort of slapstick comedy. Yet it is based on a tragic and rather gruesome story that the Latin poet Ovid retold in his poem *The Metamorphoses*.

Perception versus Sight

Seeing is the act of using the eyes to gain physical knowledge about the world. Perceiving is the psychological act of interpreting information received through the eyes and other senses. In act 3, Shakespeare plays with ideas of vision, of blindness, and of different ways of interpreting what one sees. One of the things that love, or infatuation, does is to make the lover see the beloved as perfect, no matter what the actual circumstances. As you read this act, pay special attention to imagery of eyes and seeing. Analyze what Shakespeare is saying about the nature of perception.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

bequeath [bi kwēth] v. to leave to or pass on to, as in a will

chide [chīd] v. to scold

derision [di rizh'ən] n. scorn

entreat [en trēt'] v. to beg

rebuke [ri bük'] v. to scold

recompense [rek'əm pəns'] n. payment

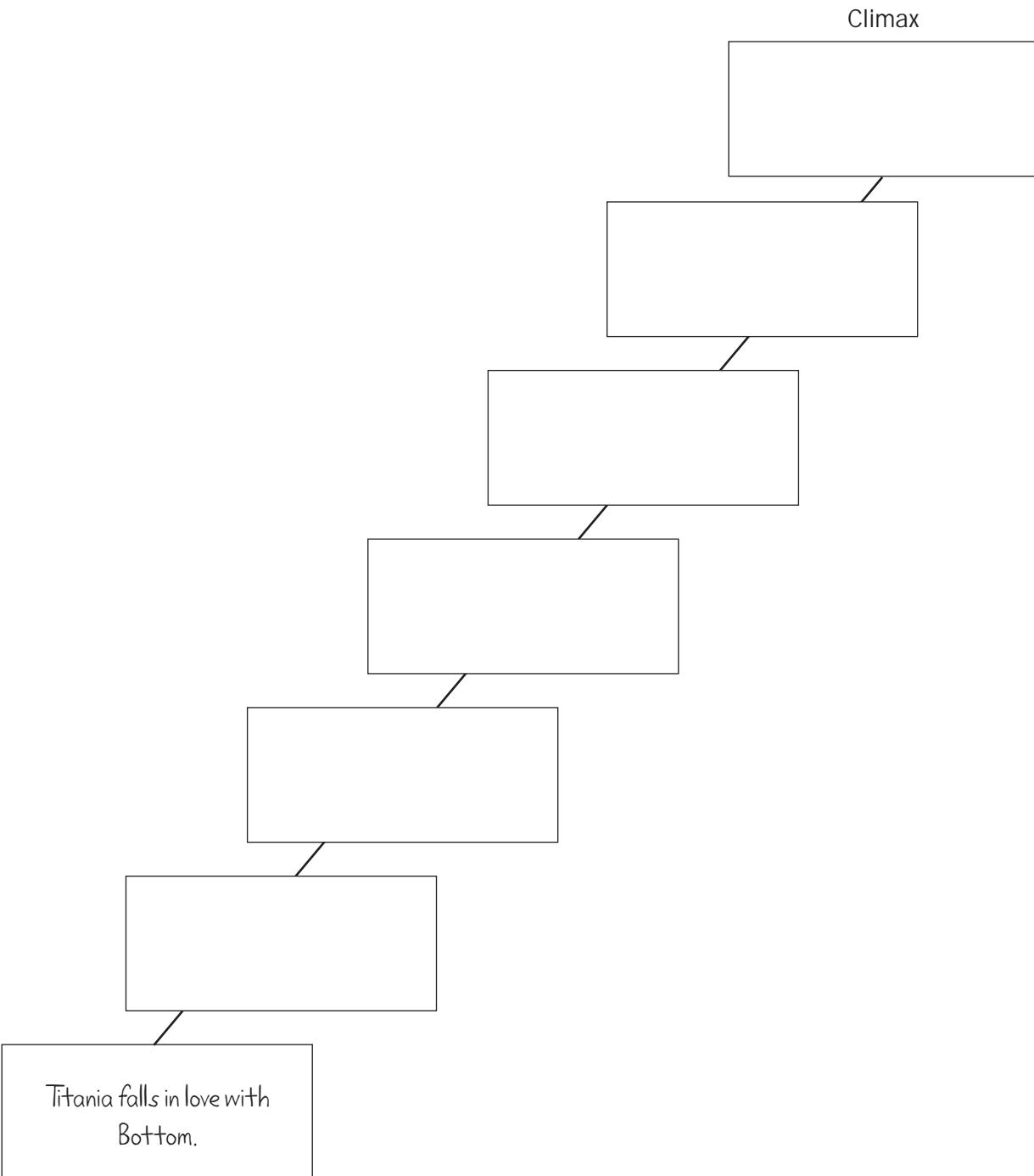
sojourn [sō'jurn] v. to stay somewhere for a while

spurn [spurn] v. to reject

Active Reading

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 3

The climax, or turning point, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes at the end of act 3. Describe the climax in the box at the top of the diagram below. In the other boxes, write the major events leading up to the climax. Write the events in the correct chronological order. You may add more boxes if you wish.



Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 3

Personal Response

Some critics see Bottom as a fool. Others think he is wiser than he appears. What is your opinion of Bottom?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How does Bottom become an ass? What is the reason for this strange event?

2. What does Oberon realize when he sees Demetrius following Hermia?

3. What causes Helena to become angry with Hermia? In your opinion, why does Helena refuse to believe her friend and her would-be lovers?

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In act 3, what emotion does Oberon show he is capable of? How does he show this?

5. Think of characters from television or the movies who are tricksters like Puck. Why might audiences enjoy watching the antics of such characters?

Literature and Writing

Police Report

Imagine that you are a police officer investigating reports of strange occurrences in the woods outside Athens. You have interviewed all of the participants and are going to write a report which summarizes the various comings and goings and activities of the persons involved. Review your notes from the **Focus Activity** on page 20 on the topics of illusion and reality. Then write your police report. As a police officer, you are not interested in illusion, poetic details, or complex symbolic explanations. You need to focus on reality. In your report, address who, what, when, where, and why.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Some of the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are **round** characters. In other words, they undergo psychological growth as a result of their experiences. Other characters move the plot forward but do not undergo any real, inner change. These are **flat** characters. With your classmates, categorize the characters in the play as either round or flat. For each character, identify at least two examples from the text that support your analysis of the characterization. Then discuss the role of flat characters in a comedy.

Science Connection

Imagine that you, like the Athenian tradesmen in act 3, need to know when the next full moon will be. Check the newspaper, an almanac, or the Internet for information on the phases of the moon. Then create a chart showing what the moon will look like for each night of the coming month. Display your chart in class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 4

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Think of a movie or book in which characters have an unusual experience that makes them shake their heads and ask, “Did that really happen?”

Dream List

Working in a small group, list stories, novels, movies, and television shows in which a character has an amazing experience and then wakes up to realize it was just a dream. Then compare your lists with the ones compiled by other groups.

Setting a Purpose

As you read, note the characters who explain their behavior by saying they were dreaming or under a spell.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

A curious feature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the casual way in which Shakespeare mixes his settings. Whereas some of his fairies are beings from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon folklore, and the flowers and seasons he describes belong to the English countryside, Theseus and Hippolyta inhabit the world of ancient Greece. In this act, the royal lovers refer to Sparta, an ancient Greek city; Thessaly, a region of Greece; and Crete, a Greek island. Then, amusingly, Theseus mentions St. Valentine, a Christian martyr who lived and died long after the era in which Theseus would have lived.

Falling Action

After the **climax**, or turning point, of a drama has been reached, most of the suspense is over. The highest emotional peak has been reached, and the major conflict has been encountered. Still, the audience likes to see all of the loose ends tied up. That occurs during the part of the plot known as the **falling action**. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the falling action mostly takes place in act 4.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

discourse [dis'kôrs] *n.* conversation

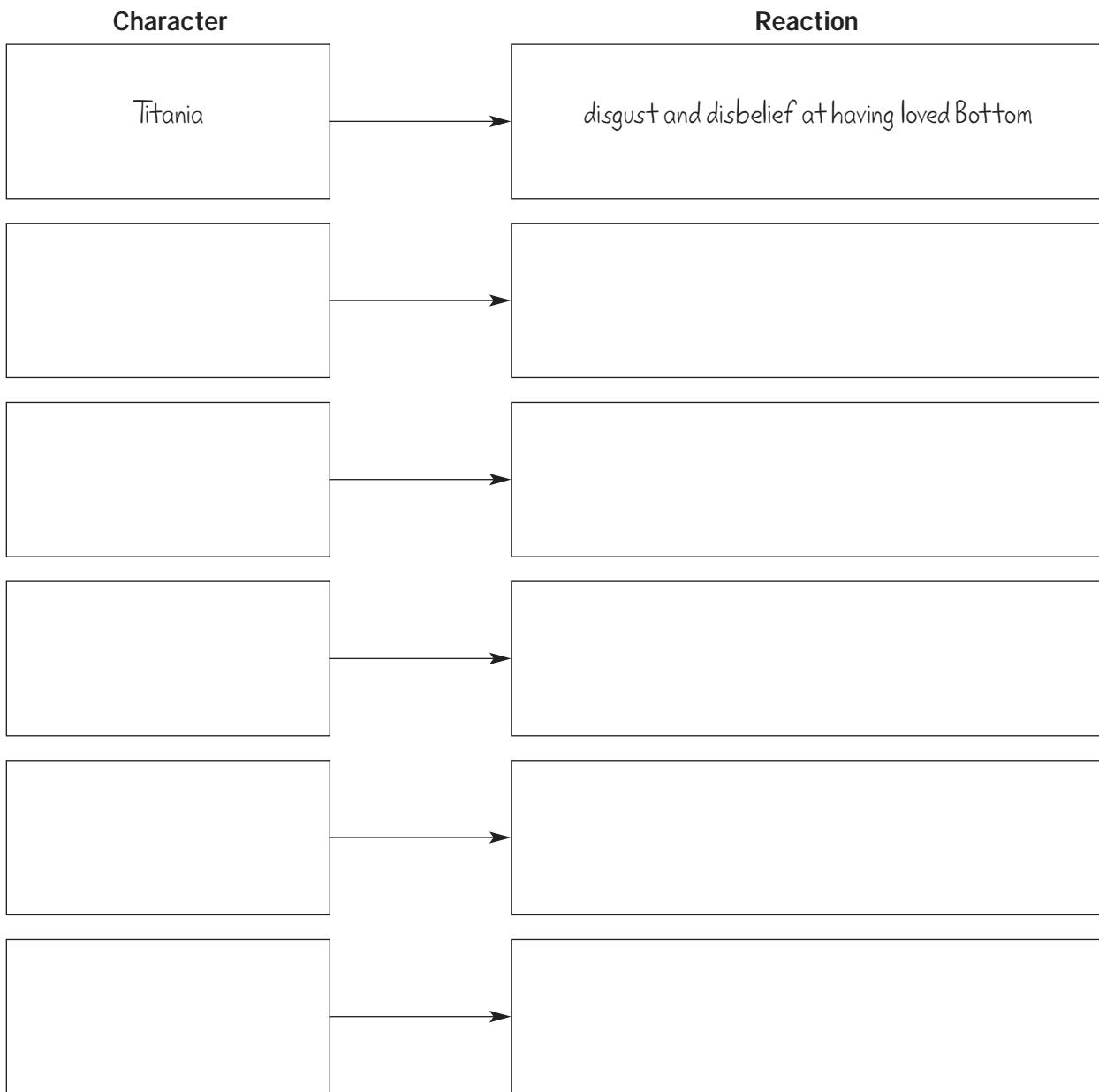
enmity [en'mî tî] *n.* hostility

paragon [par'ə gon'] *n.* model of perfection

Active Reading

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 4

In this act, a number of characters wake up. Complete the diagram below. In each box, write the name of a character who wakes up in act 4. Then, in the space beside the box, summarize that character's reaction to what happened during the night.



Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 4

Personal Response

Compare this act to the previous one. In which act did the majority of the characters enjoy themselves most? Which act did you enjoy more? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

- How does Titania respond when Oberon asks for the fairy child this time? What does this reveal about the strength of the love potion?

- How do most of the dreamers respond to the dream experience upon waking? Which character is changed permanently by the dream experience?

- How does Theseus's current decision regarding Hermia and Lysander contradict his earlier statement?

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 4

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. The fourth act opens and ends with Bottom at center stage. What is your opinion of Bottom's character? How might he be the antithesis, or opposite, of Theseus's character?

5. In this act, several characters look back at prior infatuations with disbelief. What do you think Shakespeare is saying about love and infatuation?

Literature and Writing

Writing a Letter

When Bottom is reunited with his friends, they press him for details of what happened, but he is unable to tell them much. Imagine that later Bottom calms down enough to relate his amazing experiences. Write a letter from Bottom to his friends telling about his transformation into an ass, his meeting with the fairies, and his love affair with Titania. Try to write as Bottom would (misusing long words, for example).

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Discuss Bottom's reaction when he rejoins his friends. Why does he tell them so little about his experience? Do you think he is simply unwilling to do so, or is he simply unable to express himself clearly? Give reasons for your answer. Review the **Focus Activity** on page 24 about dream experiences. Then describe times when you or others have had an experience that others couldn't or wouldn't understand.

Music Connection

Bottom decides to commission Peter Quince to write a ballad called "Bottom's Dream." In small groups, imagine that you have been asked to compose the musical accompaniment. Remember that at the beginning of act 4, Bottom told the fairies that he likes to listen to the "tongs and bones" (act 4, scene 1, line 30). Tongs were pieces of metal struck against each other and bones were actual bones. These instruments were used in comical or in less sophisticated musical performances. In your performance, use silly-sounding instruments such as musical saws, kazoos, pots and pans, and anything else you can make out of ordinary household or classroom items.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Have you ever seen a live performance that was so badly presented it was entertaining?

Two-way Traffic

A live theatrical performance is a two-way relationship between the performers and the audience. Make a list of ways in which the performers affect the audience. Then, next to that list, jot down typical audience reactions to the performance.

Setting a Purpose

Pay attention to how Theseus, Hippolyta, and the other members of the audience react to the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

For wealthy Elizabethans, entertainment was something quite different from today's CD/video/television center. Elizabethans, poor and rich, watched live entertainment. Nobles and members of the royalty could afford to have performers come to their homes. Sometimes they watched knights jousting in courtyards or tennis players competing in special indoor rooms. Often they watched theater. Every year, one of England's great theater companies would be chosen to appear at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. The Queen's Master of the Revels (like Theseus's Master of the Revels, Philostrate) would watch a number of performances and pick the best. Then no expense was spared for the final production. Workers painted elaborate sets and made costumes out of silk and velvet.

Shakespeare's Relevance

Shakespeare writes about kings and queens, fairies, magic spells, and ancient Athens. Yet he is such a keen observer of human psychology that his characters and themes still speak to today's audiences. For example, in the characters of the star-crossed lovers, Shakespeare skillfully illustrates the feelings and actions experienced by two people who are infatuated with each other. At the same time, he shows how silly and ridiculous those actions may seem to someone who does not share these feelings. He sums up the attitude of the outside observer in the often-quoted words of Puck, "what fools these mortals be!" (act 3, scene 2, line 115). These are all feelings that we can relate to today.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

amends [ə mēndz'] *n.* something done to make up for a fault or mistake

audacious [ô dā' shəs] *adj.* bold

gait [gāt] *n.* manner of walking

premeditated [prē med'i tāt əd] *adj.* planned

reprehend [rep'ri hēnd'] *v.* to find fault with

satire [sat'īr] *n.* literary work exposing human vices and shortcomings to ridicule and scorn

transfigure [trans fig'yər] *v.* to change

Active Reading

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5

Shakespeare uses a number of different techniques to create humor in the play-within-a-play. Use the graphic organizer below to indicate examples of some of his comic devices.

ridiculous metaphor	lily lips (line 347)
excessive alliteration	
breaking the play's illusion of reality	
using the wrong word or name	
repeating a word excessively	

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5

Personal Response

Did the play-within-a-play make you laugh? Look back at your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 28 to help you explain your answer. Make a list of some of the more humorous lines in the play performed by Bottom and his actors.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does Theseus think of the lovers' adventure? Is this a reaction you would expect from Theseus?

2. Why does Hippolyta initially seem hesitant to watch the play?

3. Why does Snug, who plays the Lion, make a fuss about proclaiming his true identity?

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In reading the play-within-a-play, we become the audience for the drama played out by Theseus, Hippolyta, and the others. These performers, in turn, form the audience for the reenactment of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. How does observing another audience help you understand the relationship between audience and performers?

5. Modern television shows often create comic effects by having a silly, innocent, or “clueless” character and a sarcastic, knowing, clever character play off of each other. What examples can you think of?

Literature and Writing

Hippolyta's Response

Hippolyta is rather embarrassed at times by how the audience makes fun of the players. At other times she joins in the fun. Imagine yourself as Hippolyta. Write a brief explanation of why the show was so ridiculous and why you eventually came to enjoy yourself.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In your group, identify ways in which *Pyramus and Thisbe* might be unsuitable for a wedding celebration. Are there any ways in which the play might be appropriate? In what ways is the play-within-a-play an ironic commentary on what the two pairs of young lovers (Demetrius and Helena, Lysander and Hermia) have gone through earlier?

Performing

Cast the play-within-a-play and perform it in the classroom. Costumes and sets are not necessary, but make sure you follow the stage directions, both stated and implied. If possible, videotape the performance.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Responding

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Personal Response

After reading and studying this play, would you watch a performance of it? Why or why not? How do you think watching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would change your response to the play?

Writing About the Play

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare analyzes the role of imagination in love and in art. He shows the dangers of an overactive imagination and the joy of seeing beyond the everyday world. On a separate sheet of paper, write a brief essay about the benefits and drawbacks of an active human imagination. Draw examples and quotations from the play.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Comedy

Christopher Fry

Before You Read

Focus Question

What are some things that make you laugh? Do you ever wonder why sometimes things that were not intended to be humorous seem funny?

Background

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare turns what might have been a tragedy into a comedy. Christopher Fry's article, which appeared in *Vogue* magazine, reflects on the nature of comedy and laughter and their relation to the big picture of life.

Responding to the Reading

1. What do you suppose Fry means when he says that "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair"?

2. Do you think that laughter is a way to deal with the tragedies we experience in life? Explain.

3. **Making Connections** In creating characters for a comedy, Fry says, "If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy." How might this statement apply to the characters of Helena, Lysander, Hermia, and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

Literature Groups

Within your group, have each person identify some lines or scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that seem funny. Discuss why you think they are funny. What characteristics or events seem to make people laugh the most? Do your opinions seem to fit in with Fry's description of comedy?

Forget the Footnotes! And Other Advice

Norrie Epstein

Before You Read

Focus Question

Have you ever listened to a language you don't speak and yet felt that you understood?

Background

Norrie Epstein teaches literature at the University of California. In an effort to make Shakespeare more accessible, she wrote a book called *The Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard*. The following selection draws on advice from different experts on how to understand and enjoy Shakespeare.

Responding to the Reading

1. What do the experts have to say about understanding Shakespeare?

2. Whose advice makes the most sense to you? Explain your choice.

3. **Making Connections** In your opinion, would it be better to see or read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

Justify your answer.

Expert Advice

Having read one of Shakespeare's comedies, imagine that you are a Shakespearean expert and Norrie Epstein has asked you to contribute to her book. Write a few lines of advice to a Shakespearean novice on what you think is the best way to approach Shakespeare's plays.

Based on an Original Idea by William Shakespeare

Victoria McKee

Before You Read

Focus Question

Do you like remakes of movies and songs? Or is it best to stick with originals, in your opinion?

Background

This newspaper article was written by Victoria McKee. McKee covers a range of modern film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why do you suppose actors are willing to accept a lower fee for the opportunity to play a Shakespearean role?

2. How do big-name actors attract people who would otherwise not read or see any of Shakespeare's plays?

3. **Making Connections** In terms of modernizing Shakespeare, with whose approach do you agree, Branagh's or McKellen's?

Create Your Own Production

Working with others in your literature group, choose a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to perform in front of the class. You may choose either to keep the original scene, or to update it, using language and scenarios you and your friends encounter everyday. Before performing, present to the class your reason for keeping the original or for updating the scene. Have the other groups in the class rate your performance.

Allow Puck to Introduce Kids to Will

Lynne Heffley

Before You Read

Focus Question

What is the most impressive costume you've ever seen?

Background

Lynne Heffley interviews artistic director Lisa Wolpe about the adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company.

Responding to the Reading

1. How might a contemporary setting, as Wolfe says, make the play more accessible?

2. What elements of the adaptation make it contemporary?

3. **Making Connections** Do you agree with Lisa Wolpe that New York City makes a good setting for a modern *Midsummer Night's Dream*? Why or why not?

Costume Design

With a partner, create costume representations for at least two of the characters in the play. Leaf through fashion magazines for inspiration, or look in the fine arts section of your library. You may even draw ideas from other cultural traditions to create your designs. The main idea is to keep the costume true to the character.

How the Bard Won the West

Jennifer Lee Carrell

Before You Read

Focus Question

Why are some people comfortable in front of an audience while others are not?

Background

Jennifer Lee Carrell, a Shakespearean scholar from Harvard, takes a trip out West and discovers just how popular the playwright was among cowboys and miners.

Responding to the Reading

1. What might a man like Jim Bridger have in common with Shakespeare?

2. How would you describe the Western approach to Shakespeare?

3. How important was the audience to Western theater in the nineteenth century?

4. What do you suppose Lawrence Levine means when he suggests that “When Shakespeare stopped being story and began to be art, it began to seem distant”?

5. **Making Connections** How do you think Shakespeare would have reacted to a nineteenth-century Western audience?

Speaking and Listening

With a partner, choose a favorite scene from the play and read it silently to yourselves. Then take turns reading it aloud to your partner, ad-libbing if you want, and adding gestures and different voice intonations. Discuss with your partner the differences between reading it silently and reading it aloud. Which action involves more people? Which requires more participation?