

---

## UNIT 5 THE MECHANICALS

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Identities Of The Mechanicals
- 5.2 The Mechanicals And The Forest
- 5.3 The Play-Within-The-Play
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Questions

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The question "Who are the Mechanicals?" raises two questions:

- Why did Shakespeare include the Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
- Does the Mechanicals play increase our understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Shakespeare's England?

We will break up answers to these questions into the Mechanicals' many identities, why they are in the forest, and their play about Pyramus and Thisbe.

---

### 5.1 IDENTITIES OF THE MECHANICALS

---

The Mechanicals appear in Act I, sc.ii when they discuss the play they will perform at Theseus' wedding. The first Act of a play introduces important characters and their relationships. By introducing the Mechanicals after the Aristocrats, Shakespeare dramatises the social hierarchy in Athens. The Mechanicals are inferior so they appear last. They rehearse their play in Act III, sc.i. during which Bottom vanishes and Titania falls in love with him. This is the first interaction between two social strata. Bottom returns to his friends in Act IV, sc.ii. They are relieved that their play can take place now. This is one of the many moments when harmony returns to the play. The Mechanicals finally enact their play in Act V after the triple wedding of the aristocrats.

A Romantic Comedy usually ends with weddings of the lords and ladies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the lords and ladies are married in Act IV. Shakespeare's play and the Mechanicals' play end almost simultaneously in Act V, as if Shakespeare were respecting them for being fellow theatre people. After Theseus' discourteous comments on their play, Shakespeare is very courteous towards the Mechanicals. In short, though they are often comic, Shakespeare sympathises with them.

The Mechanicals comprise the fourth group of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Their difference from the rest of the mortals in the play is marked in the following ways:

- The Mechanicals are at the bottom of the social ladder.
- Some of their names suggest their poor economic condition, e.g., "Starveling." According to Brooks' footnote to the *Dramatis Personae*, tailors were proverbially weak and thin. Another critic adds that Starveling's name is an almost literal description of someone suffering from acute hunger. In 1596, the time this play is said to have been first performed, this hunger was compounded by shortage of food and high prices.
- The Mechanicals are the only characters who have dual roles. They are defined by their professions as well as by their roles in the *Pyramus-Thisbe* play. (Brooks points out that their names are suited to their professions.)
- The Mechanicals are the only characters with distinctly English names. One could say that this is their national identity. We have seen that Shakespeare's audience was largely from the same class as the Mechanicals and would have identified more readily with English names and professions than with Athenian ones. It is possible that Shakespeare included the Mechanicals to appeal to this largest section of his audience.
- The Mechanicals as amateur actors are also more English than Athenian. In Elizabethan England, actors often travelled from village to village performing on makeshift stages. We notice a reference to this in Puck's description of the players in as "rude mechanicals, / That work for bread upon Athenian stalls" (II ii 9-10). Athenian drama, in contrast, was enacted in amphitheatres that still exist because they were so well made.
- Bottom the weaver is the most outstanding Mechanical. He is chosen to be *Pyramus*; an ass's head is magically placed on his head; queen *Titania* falls in love with him; he is the most talkative of the Mechanicals who advises *Quince* the director on the script and performance; he wants to act every part in their play (see Act I sc.i); he is loved by all the Mechanicals who feel they cannot enact their play if he is absent; his speech is richest in absurd language; he is never embarrassed even when he is with *Dukes* and queens; and he is the only Mechanical to soliloquise, that is, to talk when he is alone on the stage (IV i 199-217). The most valid reason given by scholars for why Bottom is made more important than the other Mechanicals is that the part was written specially for *William Kempe* an outstanding comic actor. Many in the audience came especially to see *Kempe*. There is no equivalent role for a particular actor among the other characters.
- Another interesting possibility is that apart from the food riots in 1596, there was an uprising of artisans against misgovernance. Weavers were prominent among them. Though the uprising was harshly suppressed, it did challenge government authority. In a mild parallel, when queen *Titania* falls in love with a weaver (*Bottom*) she ignores her husband the fairy king. Thus the weaver, however unwittingly, challenges the authority of the king, whereas the aristocrats uphold the law.

---

## 5.2 THE MECHANICALS AND THE FOREST

---

Why are the Mechanicals in the forest? Here are three reasons in ascending order of importance.

- Disorder as well as magical things are possible in the forest. Most of these magical happenings create comic confusion. For instance, mixing of socially unequal groups is not possible in Athens but does take place in the forest. One result is that Titania falls in love with a Mechanical. The ass's head on Bottom is simply Puck's mad addition to Oberon's basic plot which is to make Titania in love with a socially unsuitable person. This is meant to be comic.
- The forest trees, bushes and undergrowth contribute to the confusion, especially at night. People get lost in them and separated from their friends and loved ones. Bottom's separation from the other Mechanicals is a major confusion of the play. It also makes possible the comedy of a queen falling in love with a weaver.
- Chiefly, the Mechanicals are in the forest so that they can rehearse their play without fear of anyone stealing their ideas, or so says Quince. The play is so absurd that no one is likely to want to steal it. Nevertheless, Quince's comment reminds us that there was a lot of competition among playwrights for ideas for new plays. Playwrights, Shakespeare among them, cheerfully stole ideas from all sorts of places – ancient literature, folk tales, and each other.

---

### 5.3 THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY

---

The two issues here are

- What is the Mechanicals' play about?
- Why did Shakespeare use the play-within-the-play?

What is the Mechanicals' play about?

The Mechanicals want to perform a play at Theseus' wedding but they are uncertain what it should be about. Bottom suggests that it should be about a tyrant, about "Ercles," (his mispronunciation of "Hercules"). Quince is determined that it should be "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (I ii 11-12). A romantic story is appropriate for a wedding but the Pyramus-Thisbe story ends in disaster. Mistakenly thinking that a lion has eaten Thisbe, Pyramus kills himself; Thisbe finds him dead and kills herself.

A Romantic comedy ends with weddings, dances, and feasts, all of which represent harmony and fruitfulness. The tragic ending of the Pyramus-Thisbe play contrasts with that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If there is any comparison between Quince and Shakespeare, it is that Shakespeare is aware of the Romantic Comedy formula, Quince is not.

Though the Pyramus-Thisbe story ends tragically, the Mechanicals' stage representation of it is ludicrous. The Mechanicals act so badly and their verse is so ridiculous that the audience can only laugh. In short, any tragic effect is dispersed in laughter.

In the next section we will see why Shakespeare had his Mechanicals enact a tragic love story.

Why did Shakespeare include a play-within-the-play?

The play-within-the-play was quite common in Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare used it in *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ben Jonson used it in *Bartholomew Fair* and John Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Playwrights used it to comment on the main action and theatre culture.

A play-within-the-play underlined the most important ideas of the main play. For most of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the couples are not happily in love. They either actually quarrel or are on the verge of quarrelling. By making his fairies use magic, Shakespeare has all the right couples suddenly and contentedly in love.

The Mechanicals' play is both similar and different to this. Pyramus and Thisbe are in love and want to marry but their families have quarrelled and will not permit it. At the end, they are separated forever by death. The story reminds one of *Romeo and Juliet* which some critics think Shakespeare parodied in the Mechanicals' play. The more likely explanation is that the Mechanicals' "lamentable comedy" dramatises the tragic outcome of a parental injunction against love, which is how the Lysander-Hermia story may have ended, while comedy, lamentable or not, fits in with the marriage celebration.

Elizabethan dramatists often used the play-within-the-play to satirise aspects of theatre culture. Among Shakespeare's satiric targets in the Pyramus-Thisbe play are:

- **Bad plays and playwrights:** The script of the Pyramus-Thisbe play is ridiculously brief; it is ad hoc, as if being made up on the spot; tragedy and comedy are jumbled together; it has a lot of action but no character development; its verse is poor (doggerel is evident in, e.g., V i 214-221). The playwright wants to show off his classical knowledge but his script shows his ignorance of classical literature (see, e.g., the classical names in V i 194-197). His knowledge of English is equally amusing ("Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams" in V i 261). He thinks the audience will not understand the dramatic devices, so detailed comic explanations are included: the lantern is the horned moon, Snout is the wall, the lion introduces himself in a long speech and says the ladies must not be scared of him.
- **Bad actors:** The Mechanicals mispronounce words; they repeat lines if they think the audience has not heard them the first time (see V i 231-236); they deliver lines incomprehensibly out of nervousness (this is especially true of the Prologue); they converse with the audience.
- **Undisciplined audiences:** Loud comments from the audience disturb the actors. Audience and actors begin a dialogue (V i 246-249; 335-341). In Unit 1, we saw that this actually used to happen in Elizabethan theatres. Theseus sits through most of the play but begins to walk out before it ends. The players are desperate to keep their audience and suggest that they could perform a dance (Bergomask) instead of the Epilogue. All this was based on what actually happened in theatres.

[The rudeness of the Athenian aristocrats was emphasised in an old black and white film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Mechanicals leave the stage to prepare for the Bergomask. While they are changing, the aristocrats walk out of the room. The Mechanicals emerge excitedly from the Green Room (actors' changing room) only to see the backs of their audience. Their faces fall. They exit from the opposite side of the stage.]

---

## 5.4 LET US SUM UP

---

Of the three groups of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the aristocrats and fairies have more in common with each other than with the Mechanicals. They are mortals and the fairies are not, but their social leaders are rulers (Duke Theseus, King Oberon). Oberon, in fact, tells us how Titania is almost in love with Theseus, making it clear that there is social interaction between the aristocrats and the fairies.

But the Mechanicals are a separate group. Shakespeare used them for practical reasons (most of the audience would have identified with them; Bottom was a good part for Kempe); for professional reasons (he satirises the worst of Theatre culture through them); and for comic reasons (their language, ignorance of the new learning, and innocence creates much of the comic confusion).

Shakespeare presents them as comic but loveable.

---

## 5.5 QUESTIONS

---

1. How do we know that the Mechanicals are more English than any other set of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. What social strata do they belong to?
3. What does the name "Starveling" have to do with the harvests of 1595-96?
4. For whom did Shakespeare create the role of Bottom?
5. In what ways is Bottom the most outstanding Mechanical?
6. What use did Elizabethan playwrights make of the play-within-the-play?
7. In which of his other plays did Shakespeare use the play-within-the-play?
8. What are the common points between the main play and the Mechanicals' play?
9. What aspects of Elizabethan theatre culture are satirised in the Mechanicals' play?
10. Why do the Mechanicals rehearse in the forest?