

# Let's Talk about SEX

## Never getting any...

Life in Athens is hard when no one wants you to have any sex.

“In Athens sexual desire is controlled through the conventional language in which it is expressed” (McEnvoy 140).

Maybe you want to marry a different man than the one your father chose—Theseus threatens to send you to a nunnery! Or maybe you wanted your girlfriend to sleep next to you in the forest, but she deems it improper... so what's the big deal?

## If you are a fairy, you...

are constantly being associated with sex and sexuality!

- In Elizabethan England, the idiom “going to see the fairies” meant going to engage in inappropriate or sexual behavior. That might explain why the lovers keep losing their clothes...
- The phrase “taken by fairies” indicated a woman who was pregnant outside of marriage and had to leave to have the baby in private.

- In Elizabethan fairy-tales, there was a common story of fairies leaving money in the shoes of good maids. Other writings revealed that this story was just a cover for a Master of the House who would leave money in the shoes of a maid as an exchange for sexual favors.
  
- If an innocent person would be shamed by an incident, fairies would be blamed for the behavior. If a woman was forced into a sexual act, if someone found money that wasn't theirs, if a child accidentally broke something, a fairy was an accepted scapegoat.
  - “[*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*] literalizes the strategic use of fairy allusions as a cover for acts regarded as illicit by the dominant culture” (Lamb 303).
  - The lovers being alone together at night? Changing their minds about whom they want? Suddenly finding themselves with less clothing? All of these things would be considered illicit, but Shakespeare made them stomach-able by employing the fairy excuse.

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New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

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# I Ain't Never Seen an...

## ASS LIKE THAT

### Why exactly does Bottom get an ass's head?

- Many critics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* explain this specific choice as a physical representation of his idiocy. Basically, he acts like an ass so he becomes one.

### But there is more to the story!

Elizabethan symbolism associates the Ass with **sexual potency**. Bottom having an ass's head implied that he was given sexual power. **There is nothing that suggests that Bottom knows he has this new sexual prowess, nor that he would have changed his behavior to reflect the new sexuality**, but the Elizabethans certainly caught the innuendo.

The joke was that Titania was attracted to Bottom's sexual symbolism but **didn't know why**, while her fairy train completely understood why she found him so "appealing" (Kehler).

Bottom's sexual interactions with Titania were considered "**a socially unacceptable sexual union** between an artisan and an upper-class woman" but

Shakespeare frees the pair from blame by saying she was in a state of potion-induced dreaming (Lamb 303). When Titania is put under the spell, “**the sleep frees her from inhibitions**” (Kehler 119).

#### Works Cited

Kehler, Dorothea. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*.

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## **So you're INVISIBLE.**

### **How does that make you feel?**

#### **Sad... Look at ME! Look at ME!**

Some fairies are quite playful with humans, because they want to get their attention. Because you can touch and move physical things in the world, you often rearrange things the humans will see so you can catch their eye. You hope humans might notice these small changes and believe in you again!

If you are this type of fairy you might be found following humans closely, hovering about waiting for a moment you can get them to notice you. You might leave them small trifles or coins to reward the people you watch or plant flowers on maidens' skirts (Peele).

#### **Excited. Now I can play tricks on all the humans...**

If you are this type of fairy, you have a bit of a dark side to you. You enjoy making humans confused, getting them lost, or even playing tricks on them that they will undoubtedly blame on someone they can see. You revel in mischief! On the other hand, you get blamed for things you didn't even do, so humans won't have to take the blame. Usually they blame you for their inappropriate behavior or small crimes they don't want to be punished for (Lamb 303).

You often find yourself stealing items from one person and framing another, breaking humans' belongings, or even attempting a little fairy magic to bewilder them and amuse yourself. You take the utmost pleasure in their frustration, but really it is all in good fun (Latham 219, 223).

## **All right—I don't need them to see me.**

Your power is inborn. You don't need humans to see you to prove yourself. They may wander in and out of your land, but you see them as something a bit pathetic—lacking the knowledge and freedom of the magical world. Sometimes you take pity on them, other times you don't think it is even worth your help, since they are far beyond repair.

If you possess in you the kindness of a good fairy, you may find yourself watching them, using some of your powers to assist them (Dent 120). If you are more apathetic, you may find yourself indifferent to the humans entirely, ignoring them when they pass.

## **I'm NOT invisible, I swear!**

Other fairies might think you are in denial, but you fully believe humans can still see you. You aren't invisible—you are simply hiding from humans! Some Elizabethan plays and stories describe fairies as disappearing into acorns at the sight of humans (Lamb 308-309).

If you truly believe humans can still see you, maybe you are one of the fairies that takes shelter in an acorn, hides behind a flower, or even moves about quickly outside the sight of the humans passing by.

## **How did this even happen to me?**

You weren't always invisible. Blame Shakespeare. During the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly Shakespeare's writing, people stopped believing they could see fairies, and started to see them as inexplicable otherworldly magic. The Elizabethans once thought they could play and interact

with you, but right around the time Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a trend began to emerge of people believing fairies could not be seen nor touched.

It was around this same year that stories and plays started describing fairies as small, even flower-sized creatures, while the King and Queen were described as human-sized (Latham 188).

Sadly, some people don't even *believe* in you anymore. With the end of visible fairies came the beginning of the end of fairies altogether. Elizabethans were just beginning to see fairies as just part of stories they told to children to explain phenomena, and some even saw people who still believed in fairies as uneducated (Lamb 282).

## **I'm *not* a FAIRY**

### **so how does this apply to me?**

#### **Do I have to believe in fairies?**

No.

Elizabethans told fairy stories to children, just as we tell stories about Santa and the Easter Bunny. Those stories were meant to explain things that otherwise couldn't be explained. During this era, it was expected that educated people would eventually grow out of their belief in fairies and magic altogether, in favor of more realistic beliefs.

Though many people believed that fairies were just stories, there were still enough tales and plays to suggest that fairylore had not yet left the memory of Elizabethans, so some people still held fast to their beliefs.

## Can I sense the fairies?

In short—*Some* people can.

Not everyone believed they could sense the present of fairies, but Elizabethans believed that children and young people were more likely to experience this phenomenon, as they hadn't grown out of that imagination.

You might catch a glimpse of a fairy as it rushes to hide, you might feel it as it passes, you may even have an instinct that tells you something is near (Latham).

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# Living in a DREAM WORLD

The play is called *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, after all... so what is the dreaming all about?

Elizabethans had many beliefs about dreaming

- To Elizabethans, **dreaming is a chance to delve into a world the conscious mind may not have been able to recognize or understand.** It may be an amalgam of experiences or sensations experienced while awake.
  
- To the Elizabethans **“we dreame by night what we by day have thought”** (Crawford 92)
  - To modern scientists, this type of dreaming is considered that which “help us reformulate our views on most important matters. They edit out old and unused data and add in new data” (Dorian).
  
- Dreamers could take in the elements in the world around them and incorporate them into their dreams. A sound heard while dreaming could be reinterpreted for the purpose of the dream (Tart).

So are dreams even important?

Yes!

Older dramatic criticisms explain Puck's final apology speech as calling dreams mere "trifles" and call dreams a mere excuse for the experiences in the forest.

- More recent studies have theorized that because dreaming was seen as really significant to Elizabethans, Shakespeare's audience would have disagreed with that assessment.

This new trend for deciphering the "dream element" dissolves the theory that Puck is calling what happened in the woods as simply mistakes and replaces it with a new theory. This theory states that Puck is saying **the dreams were a chance for the lovers to sort out their feelings, escape the regulations of Athenian society, and reemerge with new understanding.**

"But, being good Elizabethans, we may well remember that **not all dreams are the product of disordered, passion-stimulated, never-sleeping imagination.** Some dreams are **divine revelations of truth**, however difficult to expound, and we have already seen plays of Shakespeare where dreams contained at least a prophetic, specific truth, if not a universal one" (Dent 122).

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