

A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM

The Title.

The title *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is intended to suggest that the incidents of the play are unreal and fanciful and that the story is a mere "dream," not to be taken seriously. Puck in the epilogue asks the audience to forgive the defects of the play because it is only an idle dream; and at different points in the course of the story the characters themselves refer to their night's experiences as dreams.

The Character of the Play.

A Midsummer-Night's Dream is, properly speaking, not a regular comedy, but a "masque" or interlude. A masque is a short play which depends for its interest not so much upon plot and character as upon music, dancing, costumes, and scenic effects. It is supposed that *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* was written as a wedding piece and was acted at the marriage of some nobleman to whom Shakespeare wished to do honour; and the pointed references to Queen Elizabeth in Act II., Scene I., would seem to indicate that she was present upon the occasion.

The Theme of the Play.

A Midsummer-Night's Dream is one of a group of early plays of Shakespeare in which love in some of its phases is the central theme. In this play Shakespeare treats in general of the fickleness and inconstancy of love. The lovers are types of all that is uncertain and inconstant in human love. The fairies, who are mere shadows of "mortals," resemble them in this also, and Oberon and Titania chide each other mutually for being light of love. Of all the lovers in the play, Theseus alone is strong and steadfast. His love for Hippolyta is not the result of a mere freakish fancy, for he has "wooed her with his sword" and "won her love doing her injuries!" But he, too, has experienced the feverish passions of youth, and Oberon, in chiding Titania, recites instances of the unfaithfulness of Theseus to his former loves.

Structure.

Midsummer-Night's Dream combines four different stories, or rather episodes,—the stories of Theseus and Hippolyta, the lovers, the fairies, and the clowns; and it includes in addition