

# Introduction

This book tells the stories of some plays by William Shakespeare. All of the stories in this book are about disguises and people playing tricks on each other. Two of the most common forms of disguise in the plays are women dressing up as men, and rich people pretending to be poor. As you will discover, some of the tricks that people play on each other are for fun, but some end sadly.

Two of the stories are about special dates and the things that happen on those days. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is about the summer solstice, Midsummer Eve. This special evening is celebrated on 23 June. In Shakespeare's day, it was a time for parties. It is also a tale about fairies, known for their magic and mischief.

*Twelfth Night* is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to have a second title. The play is actually called *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. People are not sure what the two titles mean. The 'Twelfth Night' is usually thought to be Epiphany, or the twelfth night of the Christmas celebration (6 January). In Shakespeare's day, this holiday was celebrated as a festival in which everything was turned upside down — very much like the upside-down world of Illyria in the play!

## About William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare lived in England, over four hundred years ago. Shakespeare was born in 1564 in

Stratford-upon-Avon. He died there in 1616 (on his 52nd birthday) but spent most of his working life in London.

Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest writers, and his plays are still enjoyed by millions of people. This is partly because of the wonderful stories they tell. He wrote a total of thirty-eight plays. He also wrote poetry, including many love sonnets. He had a great interest in human nature and all his plays are about this topic. His plays include comedies, romances, histories and tragedies.

Shakespeare spent most of his life writing plays for the theatre, most famously for the Globe Theatre. The Globe Theatre was built in 1598–99. The first recorded performance was of *Julius Caesar* in September 1599. Many of Shakespeare's plays were written for and performed at the Globe, which burnt down in 1613. It was rebuilt in 1614, only to be destroyed by fighting thirty years later. The new Globe Theatre was opened in 1997 about two hundred metres from the original site. It has lime-plastered walls and a thatched roof, just like the original.

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## A Midsummer Night's Dream: Part One

### The wedding

Prince Theseus, the ruler of Athens, was going to be married. He was going to marry Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons.

One day, just a few days before his wedding, a rich old man named Egeus came to see him. Egeus wanted to talk to Prince Theseus about something that was making him very angry. 5

Egeus had a daughter called Hermia, and he had chosen a man named Demetrius to be her husband. However, Hermia said she would not marry Demetrius. She loved another young man, called Lysander. 10

Egeus was angry with Hermia. He said she must do as he told her, or die. That was what the laws of Athens allowed in those days. 15

The Prince listened to what Egeus had to say. He told Hermia that she must obey her father, but she said she loved Lysander, and wanted to marry him.

Lysander told the Prince that Demetrius used to love Hermia's best friend, Helena. He said that Helena still loved Demetrius, and that Demetrius ought to marry her. 20

Theseus felt sorry for Hermia, but he could not let her break the law. He told her that she must marry Demetrius. If she did not, then she must either die, or become a nun for the rest of her life. As a nun she would live far from her home and friends. She would spend all her time working, and praying to God. 25