

A Midsummer Night's Dream Synopsis

Theseus, Duke of Athens, has defeated Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, in war. She has agreed to marry him. Egeus, a wealthy Athenian, brings his daughter, Hermia, to Theseus and demands the enforcement of an ancient law. Egeus has chosen a husband for her — Demetrius — but she insists on her own choice — Lysander. The law is clear: Hermia must obey her father's will or face a terrible choice death or the life of a nun. Lysander reveals that Demetrius has made love to Helena, Hermia's best friend, and then thrown her aside, but the young lovers' pleas have no effect. Theseus gives Hermia four days to make up her mind. Lysander and Hermia plan an immediate escape. The next night they will meet in the forest by moonlight and fly to a wealthy widowed aunt of his where they will marry, safe from Athenian law. Helena bursts in on them and cannot hide her distress at Demetrius' love for her friend. Hermia reassures her that she will soon be gone and the plan is revealed. The life-long friends say goodbye and Helena is left stunned by Hermia's good fortune. Unable to comprehend the cruelty of love, and blaming Hermia for Demetrius' infidelity, she resolves to tell him of the flight and gain whatever affection her intelligence might bring.

On the streets of Athens, a group of workmen meet to prepare a play for Theseus' wedding. Peter Quince, a carpenter, has written his own version of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe. The group — a tinker, a joiner, a bellows-mender and a tailor — are given their parts by Quince and instructed in the art of acting by their most confident member: a weaver called Nick Bottom. They agree to meet the next night in the forest to rehearse by moonlight and so keep their preparations secret. In the forest, a marital war rages in the spirit world. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, has adopted a young boy, the son of her close friend, an Indian Queen, who died in childbirth. Oberon, King of the Fairies and Titania's husband, is fiercely jealous and wants the boy for himself. Titania has banished him from her bed and whenever they meet, they fight.

On the night that the lovers plan their escape and the workmen plan to rehearse, Puck, Oberon's mischievous servant, and Titania's followers are embroiled in another battle. Titania taunts Oberon for his jealousy, his latest infidelities and his love for Hippolyta. Oberon attacks Titania for her love for Theseus. She blames him for their rift, which is disturbing the natural and human worlds. Oberon offers peace in return for the boy but Titania refuses and leaves, exasperated by his persistence. Oberon resolves to torment Titania in revenge. He tells Puck to seek a powerful purple flower pierced by Cupid's arrow, the juice of which, squeezed into a person's eye, will make its victim fall madly in love with the first creature they see. He plans to subject Titania to the potion in the hope that she will become obsessed with some wild beast and, in her distraction, give him the boy. At that moment, Demetrius arrives, pursued by Helena. He tries to stop her from following him, threatening to leave her to the beasts or even rape her, but she will not be deterred and holds firm in her love — resolving to die rather than give up her hope. Oberon pledges to help her and, when Puck returns with the flower, instructs him to take some of the juice and find the young Athenian who will be easily recognised by his clothes.

Oberon goes to Titania's bower where she lies, lulled into a deep sleep by her fairies. He squeezes the juice into her eyes and departs just as Hermia and Lysander arrive in the same spellbound place. The two lovers are tired and lost and resolve to sleep until dawn brings comfort. Lysander suggests that they sleep together on the same bank of earth, but Hermia insists that they sleep apart. While they sleep, Puck comes across them and, mistaking Lysander for Demetrius, squeezes the juice into his eyes. As Puck leaves, Demetrius and Helena arrive in the same place and she gives up her pursuit, too exhausted to follow further. Lying on the earth to sleep, Helena sees Lysander. Fearing that he is injured or even dead and, not seeing Hermia, she wakes him and he falls instantly in love. Helena assumes he is mocking her and flees. Lysander pursues her, stopping only to curse Hermia with his hatred. As he goes, Hermia wakes in the violent throes of a nightmare. When she finds Lysander gone, she is terrified and sets off in search.

Quince, Bottom and their colleagues arrive in the same place to rehearse. Before they start, they need to solve various problems posed by their play. Firstly, they are afraid that the killing and the lion will offend the ladies. Their solution is to write prologues explaining that the action is not real and stating their true names. Secondly, they face the challenges of bringing the moonlight and a wall into Theseus' chamber. They decide to represent both through the inventive use of two actors. They begin to rehearse at which point Puck comes across them, delighted to find such entertaining humans. He is most enthralled by the spectacle of Bottom as Pyramus and transforms him into an ass. Bottom's friends flee, hounded and driven to distraction by Puck in ferocious pursuit. Bottom is left alone. Assuming that he is the victim of an attempt to scare him, he decides to sing to show his courage. His song wakes Titania who sees the man/ass and is immediately smitten. Titania gives herself and her fairies to Bottom and, promising to transform him into an airy spirit, leads him to her bower.

Puck goes to Oberon and tells him of Titania's obsession. At that moment Hermia and Demetrius appear – she convinced that he has killed Lysander. Demetrius plays along with her fear and insists that he is desperate for her love. When he finally tells her that he has not touched Lysander, she flees swearing to never see him again. Demetrius is exhausted and falls asleep. Oberon is furious with Puck for mistaking Lysander for Demetrius and sends him looking for Helena. Oberon then squeezes the flower's juice into Demetrius' eye, at which point Puck returns bringing Helena, who is in turn pursued by Lysander pleading that she take his tears as proof that he loves her. Just then, Demetrius wakes, sees Helena and is overwhelmed with love for her. Helena now assumes that both men are mocking her. They try to reassure her by both forswearing their love for Hermia, at which point she arrives, drawn by their voices.

Hermia is stunned to find Lysander claiming to love Helena and presumes it must be some kind of joke. Her reaction leads Helena to believe that all three are joined in scorning her. She attacks Hermia for her betrayal and attempts to leave, but Lysander and Demetrius both swear to give their life for her. The two men leave to fight but Hermia holds Lysander back. When he makes it clear that his hatred of her and love for Helena is true, Hermia flies at Helena. The two men compete to protect Helena and now that Lysander is not restrained by Hermia, they leave to fight it out. Helena flees from Hermia, who follows her. Oberon is now even more furious with Puck and tells him to prevent the men from fighting by bringing down the darkest night and confusing and exhausting each by imitating the other's voice. Puck is successful and eventually all four of the young lovers fall into a deep sleep. Puck removes the potion from Lysander's eyes.

Titania and Bottom fall into her flowery bed, exhausted after a long night. Oberon has taken advantage of her humiliation and secured the boy. He is now sick of his joke and the pitiful state Titania is in. He gives her back her sight and reveals her love. Puck removes the spell on Bottom and leaves him asleep while Oberon and Titania dance a ritual in resolution of their differences. Day breaks and the fairies vanish.

In the same part of the forest, Theseus and Hippolyta are hunting with Egeus. They come across the four lovers. They are woken and when Egeus insists that Demetrius pursue his right to Hermia, a memory of the night's events returns to them. They recall how they came to be in the forest and they remember the intensity of their love for their rightful partners, but the rest remains a mystery. What is clear is that their love for their present partners is unshakeable and Theseus is moved to relieve Hermia of the threat of death and promises to marry the two couples alongside him and Hippolyta. Amazed, the lovers return to Athens. Bottom wakes expecting his cue and finds that his friends have left him alone. He is struck by the extraordinary vision of his transformation into an ass, but he does not dare give voice to it.

In Athens, Peter Quince and the others anxiously await news of their friend, assuming that he must have been irredeemably transported. When news comes that the three couples are married, dined and retired for their entertainment, the men finally give up all hope of performing the play and gaining the social and financial rewards that would surely have followed. They mourn the tragic loss of their leading actor and inspiration. At that very moment Bottom appears. He promises to report wonders, but restrains himself as he brings even greater news: they must hurry to the palace, as their play has been short-listed for performance.

In the palace, Theseus and Hippolyta await the two young couples. Hippolyta is struck by the strange stories the lovers have been telling of their night in the forest. Theseus insists that they are the imaginative fancies of minds carried away by love. When the four come, Theseus calls for some entertainment to pass the time before midnight when they will retire to bed. He is given a choice from which he picks Pyramus and Thisbe. The workmen perform their play, followed by a folk dance. At last, the midnight hour arrives: the three couples can go to bed, the workmen can enjoy their achievement and the spirits can come out once more. Titania and Oberon, now reunited in harmony, bring their fairies to bless the marriage place, the couples in their beds and the children that will come.