

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act I

William Shakespeare, 1590s, performed in 1594-96

William Shakespeare

ACT I

SCENE I

Theseus passes judgement to Hermia, who refuses to marry Demetrius and agrees to run away with Lysander. They confide in Helena, who is already in love with Demetrius.

THESEUS: Now, fair Hippolyta, **our nuptial hour**

Draws on **apace; four happy days bring in**

Another moon— but, O, methinks, how slow

This old moon wanes! She **lingers** my desires,

Like to **a step-dame or a dowager**

Long withering out a young man's revenue.

1. *Our nuptial hour:* the time of our wedding.
2. *Apace:* quickly.
3. *Four happy days bring in Another moon:* there will be a full moon in four days' time.
4. *Lingers:* makes me wait for.
5. *A step-dame or a dowager Long withering out a young man's revenue:* like a step-mother or a widow who is growing old and spending a young man's inheritance (which he would not be able to claim until she died).

HIPPOLYTA: Four days will quickly **steep** themselves in night;

Four nights will quickly dream away the time;

And then the moon, like to a silver bow

New bent in heaven, shall behold the night

Of our **solemnities.**

1. *Steep:* drown
2. *Solemnities:* marriage ceremonies.

THESEUS: Go, Philostrate,

Stir up the Athenian **youth** to merriments;

Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth;

Turn melancholy forth to funerals;

The pale companion is not for our pomp.

Hippolyta, **I woo'd thee with my sword,**

And won thy love, doing thee injuries;

But I will wed thee in **another key,**

With pomp, with **triumph** and with revelling.

1. *Youth:* young people
2. *The pale comparison is not for our pomp:* we can't have miserable fellows in our festivities.
3. *I woo'd thee with my sword, And won thy love doing thee injuries:* Theseus, a legendary ruler of Athens, fought with various

monsters and killed the Minotaur that threatened to destroy the island of Crete; how princesses fell in love with him; and how he defeated an invasion of Amazons, and married their Queen, Hippolyta.

4. *Another key*: a different way (the image is from music).

5. *Triumph*: public festival.

EGEUS: Happy be Theseus, our renowned duke!

THESEUS: Thanks, good Egeus: what's the news with thee?

EGEUS: Full of vexation come I, with complaint
Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry her.
Stand forth, Lysander- and my gracious duke,
This man hath bewitch'd the **bosom** of my child;
Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her **rhymes**,
And interchanged love-tokens with my child:
Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung,
With feigning voice verses of **feigning love**,
And **stolen the impression of her fantasy**
With bracelets of thy hair, rings, **gauds**, **conceits**,
Knacks, trifles, **nosegays**, **sweetmeats**- messengers
Of strong **prevailment** in **unharden'd** youth;
With cunning hast thou **filch'd** my daughter's heart,
Turn'd her obedience, which is **due** to me,
To stubborn harshness: and, my gracious duke,
Be it so she; will not here before your grace
Consent to marry with Demetrius,
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens,
As she is mine, I may dispose of her:
Which shall be either to this gentleman
Or to her death, according to our **law**
Immediately provided in that case.

1. *Bosom*: heart

2. *Rhymes*: love poetry

3. *With feigning voice*: with a voice that pretends to be sincere.

4. *Feigning love*: pretended love

5. *Stolen the impression of her fantasy*: caught her imagination by making an impression on her.

6. *Gauds*: silly toys

7. *Conceits*: fancy things

8. *Knacks*: knick-knacks; useless little gifts.

9. *Nosegays*: bunches of flowers

10. *Sweetmeats*: chocolates

11. *Prevailment*: persuasive power

12. *Unharden'd*: inexperienced

13. *Filch'*: stolen

14. *Due*: owed
15. *Be it so*: If
16. *I beg the ancient privilege of Athens*: I claim the traditional right of an Athenian.
17. *Law Immediately provided in that case*: the law specifically designed for such cases (against which there would be no appeal).

THESEUS: What say you, Hermia? **be advis'd** fair maid:

To you your father should be as a god;
 One that composed your beauties, yea, and one
 To whom you are **but as a form in wax**

By him imprinted and within his power

To leave the figure or **disfigure** it.

Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

1. *Be advis'd*: think carefully
2. *But as a form in wax By him imprinted*: nothing more than a wax figure that he has modelled.
3. *Disfigure*: destroy.

HERMIA: So is Lysander.

THESEUS: In himself he is;

But **in this kind, wanting** your father's **voice**,

The other must be held the worthier.

1. *In this kind*: in a matter like this
2. *Wanting*: lacking
3. *Voice*: approval

HERMIA: **I would my father look'd** but with my eyes.

1. *I would (wish) my father look*: The relationship (or lack of it) between seeing and judging, the eyes and the mind is central to the concerns of the play.

THESEUS: Rather your eyes must with his judgment look.

HERMIA: I do entreat your grace to pardon me.

I know not by what power I am made bold,

Nor how it may **concern my modesty**,

In such a presence here to **plead my thoughts**;

But I beseech your grace that I may know

The worst that may befall me in this case,

If I refuse to wed Demetrius.

1. *Concern my modesty*: affect my reputation for modesty.
2. *In such a presence*: i.e. before the Duke
3. *Plead my thoughts*: express my feelings

THESEUS: Either to **die the death** or to **abjure**

For ever the society of men.

Therefore, fair Hermia, **question your desires**;
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
You can endure the **livery** of a nun,
For **aye** to be in shady cloister **mew'd**,
To live a barren **sister** all your life,
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless **moon**.
Thrice blessed they that **master** so their **blood**,
To undergo such **maiden pilgrimage**;
But **earthlier happy** is the **rose distill'd**,
Than that which withering on the virgin thorn
Grows, lives and dies in **single blessedness**.

1. *Die the death*: be legally put to death
2. *Abjure*: renounce
3. *Question your desires*: ask yourself what you really want.
4. *Know of your youth*: remember that you are young.
5. *Livery*: habit
6. *Aye*: ever
7. *Mew'd*: shut up
8. *Sister*: nun
9. *Moon*: Diana, goddess of the moon and of chastity
10. *Master*: discipline
11. *Maiden pilgrimage*: life vowed to celibacy
12. *Earthlier happy*: more happy on earth
13. *Rose distill'd*: the rose that is plucked, whose scent is distilled to make perfume.
14. *Single blessedness*: the particular state of grace granted (in many religions) to those who vow to never to marry, and live in celibacy.

HERMIA: So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
Ere I will my **virgin patent** up
Unto **his lordship**, whose unwished **yoke**
My soul consents not to **give sovereignty**.

1. *Virgin patent*: right to remain a virgin
2. *His lordship*: the domination of this man.
3. *Yoke*: a wooden cross-piece linking two oxen together for the purpose of ploughing; from this it becomes a symbol of bondage and servitude.
4. *Give sovereignty*: acknowledge as lord and master.

THESEUS: **Take time to pause**; and, by the next new moon,
The **sealing-day** betwixt my love and me,
For everlasting bond of fellowship,
Upon that day either prepare to die
For disobedience to your father's will,
Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;
Or on Diana's altar to **protest**
For aye **austerity** and single life.

1. *Take time to pause*: wait a short time before making your decision.
2. *Sealing-day*: the day on which they will seal (make official) their vows.
3. *Protest*: vow
4. *Austerity*: strict simplicity. In the Christian church nuns and monks vow to live in poverty, chastity, and obedience.

DEMETRIUS: Relent, sweet Hermia: and, Lysander, yield Thy **crazed title** to my certain right.

1. *Crazed title*: crazed; uncertain claim (because Hermia's father does not admit it).

LYSANDER: You have her father's love, Demetrius; Let me have Hermia's- **do you marry him**.

1. *Do you marry him*: you go and marry him.

EGEUS: Scornful Lysander! true, he hath my love, And what is mine my love shall render him. And she is mine, and all my right of her I do **estate unto** Demetrius.

1. *Estate unto*: give to. The phrase is a legal one, continuing the idea that Hermia is a mere possession.

LYSANDER: I am, my lord, as **well deriv'd** as he, As **well possess'd**; my love is more than his; **My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd**, If not **with vantage**, as Demetrius'; And, which is more than all these boasts can be, I am beloved of beauteous Hermia: Why should not I then **prosecute my right**? Demetrius, I'll **avouch it to his head**, **Made love** to Nedar's daughter, Helena, And won her **soul**; and she, sweet lady, dotes, Devoutly dotes, **dotes in idolatry**, Upon this **spotted** and inconstant man.

1. *Well deriv'd*: nobly descended, of good family.
2. *Well-possess'd*: rich in possessions.
3. *My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd*: my financial position and prospects rank me as high. *Fortunes*: position in life.
4. *With vantage*: even better
5. *Prosecute my right*: persist in making my claim
6. *Avouch it to his head*: declare before his face (in his presence).
7. *Made love*: courted
8. *Soul*: affections
9. *Dotes in idolatry*: idolizes
10. *Spotted*: dishonourable.

THESEUS: I must confess that I have heard so much,
And with Demetrius thought to have spoke thereof;
But, being **over-full of self-affairs**,
My mind did **lose** it. But, Demetrius, come;
And come, Egeus; you shall go with me,
I have some **private schooling** for you both.
For you, fair Hermia, look you **arm** yourself
To **fit your fancies to your father's will**;
Or else the law of Athens yields you up
(Which by no means we may **extenuate**)
To death, or to a vow of single life.
Come, my Hippolyta: **what cheer**, my love?
Demetrius and Egeus, go along:
I must employ you in some **business**
Against our nuptial and **confer with you**
Of something nearly that concerns yourselves.

1. *Over-full of self-affairs*: too concerned with my own business.
2. *Lose*: forget.
3. *Private schooling*: advice to give you in private.
4. *For*: as for.
5. *Arm*: prepare.
6. *Fit your fancies to your father's will*: make your wishes agree with what your father wants.
7. *Extenuate*: mitigate, make easier.
8. *What cheer*: how are you feeling; perhaps Hippolyta looks sad, thinking about Hermia's difficult choice.
9. *Business*: all three syllabus must be pronounced.
10. *Against*: in preparation for.
11. *Confer with you*: discuss something that closely concerns you.

EGEUS: With duty and desire we follow you.

1. *Desire*: willingness.

[Exeunt all but LYSANDER and HERMIA]

LYSANDER: How now, my love! why is your cheek so pale?

How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

1. *How chance*: why?

HERMIA: **Belike** for want of rain, which I could well

Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.

1. *Belike*: Probably.
2. *Beteem*: pour down on.

LYSANDER: **Ay me!** for **aught** that I could ever read,

Could ever hear by tale or history,

The course of true love never did run smooth;

But, either it was different in **blood**,--

1. *Ay me*: *sighs*

2. *Aught*: anything.
3. *Blood*: social class

HERMIA: O cross! too **high to be enthrall'd to low.**

1. *High to be enthrall'd to low*: for a high-born lady to be made subject to a commoner.

LYSANDER: Or else **misgraffed in respect of years**,--

1. *Misgraffed in respect of years*: ill-matched through difference of age.

HERMIA: O spite! too old to be engaged to young.

LYSANDER: Or else it **stood upon** the choice of friends,--

1. *Stood upon*: depended on.

HERMIA: O hell! to choose love by another's eyes.

But...eyes: The lovers join in a duet of alternating lines.

LYSANDER: Or, if there were a **sympathy** in choice,
War, death, or sickness did **lay siege to it**,
Making it **momentany** as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;
Brief as the lightning in the **collied** night,
That, in a **spleen**, **unfolds** both heaven and earth,
And **ere** a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things **come to confusion**.

1. *Sympathy*: agreements.
2. *Lay siege to*: make war on.
3. *Momentany*: old form of "momentary".
4. *Collied*: blackened (from "colly" = soot).
5. *Spleen*: sudden passionate impulse
6. *Unfolds*: lights up
7. *Ere*: before
8. *Come to confusion*: are ruined, destroyed.

HERMIA: If then true lovers have been ever cross'd,

It stands as an edict in destiny:

Then **let us teach our trial patience**,

Because it is a customary cross,

As **due to love** as thoughts and dreams and sighs,

Wishes and tears, poor **fancy's** followers.

1. *If then true lovers have been ever cross'd it stands as an edict in destiny*: if true lovers have always ('ever') been frustrated ('crossed'), then fate must have some law about it.
2. *Let us teach our trial patience*: let us learn to endure this test with patience.

3. *Because it is customary cross*: because such frustration is quite normal.
4. *Due to love*: belonging to love
5. *Fancy*: love.

LYSANDER: A good **persuasion**: therefore, hear me, Hermia.

I have a widow aunt, a **dowager**

Of great revenue, and she hath no child:

From Athens is her house **remote** seven **leagues**;

And she **respects** me as her only son.

There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee;

And to that place the **sharp Athenian law**

Cannot pursue us. If thou lovest me then,

Steal forth thy father's house to-morrow night;

And in the wood, a league **without** the town,

Where I did meet thee once with Helena,

To do observance to a morn of May,

There will I **stay** for thee.

1. *Persuasion*: advice
2. *Dowager*: widow
3. *Remote*: distant
4. *League*: a rough measurement of distance, usually about three miles.
5. *Respects*: regards
6. *Sharp Athenian law cannot pursue us*: the harsh Athenian law will have no power over us.
7. *Steal forth*: creep out of
8. *Without*: outside
9. *To do observance to a morn of May*: to perform the (fertility) rites of May; which is a time when weddings and fertility in nature occurs.
10. *Stay*: wait

HERMIA: My good Lysander!

I swear to thee, by **Cupid's** strongest bow,

By his best arrow with the golden head,

By the simplicity of **Venus' doves**,

By **that which knitteth souls and prospers loves**,

And by **that fire which burn'd the Carthage queen**,

When the false Trojan under sail was seen,

By all the vows that ever men have broke,

In number more than ever women spoke,

In that same place thou hast appointed me,

To-morrow truly will I meet with thee.

1. *Cupid*: the classical (ROMAN, HERMES IS GREEK VERSION) god of love, usually depicted as a blindfolded, winged boy with a bow and two arrows, one to inspire love, and the other to kill love.

2. *Venus' Doves*: The classical goddess of love (APHRODITE IS THE GREEK VERSION) often travelled in a chariot drawn by white doves- their colour signifying the innocence ('simplicity') of pure love.
3. *That which knitteth souls and prospers loves*: Hermia may be referring to the girdle worn by and associated with Venus
4. *That fire which burn'd the Carthage queen, when the false Trojan under sail was seen*: Dido Queen of Carthage flung herself on a funeral pyre when her lover, the Trojan Aeneas, sailed away from her (Virgil's *Aeneid Book IV*).

By...thee: The rhyming couplets confirm the sincerity of Hermia's vows- which continue to link the friends together throughout the scene.

LYSANDER: Keep promise, love. Look, here comes Helena.

[Enter HELENA]

HERMIA: **God speed** fair Helena! whither away?

1. *God speed*: may God be with you.

HELENA: Call you me fair? that fair again unsay.

Demetrius loves **your fair**: O happy fair!

Your eyes are **lodestars**; and your tongue's sweet **air**

More **tuneable** than lark to shepherd's ear,

When wheat is green, when **hawthorn buds** appear.

Sickness is **catching**: O, were **favour** so,

Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go;

My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye,

My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody.

Were the world mine, Demetrius being **bated**,

The rest I'd give to be to you **translated**.

O, teach me how you look, and with what art

You sway the **motion of Demetrius' heart**.

1. *Your fair*: your beauty.
2. *Lodestars*: guiding stars.
3. *Air*: sound.
4. *Tuneable*: tuneful
5. *Hawthorn buds*: the Hawthorn of one of the first trees to flower in the English springtime.
6. *Catching*: infectious
7. *Favour*: beauty, charm
8. *Bated*: excepted.
9. *Translated*: transferred (to become Hermia's property)
10. *Sway the motion of Demetrius' heart*: influence the way Demetrius feels.

HERMIA: I frown upon him, yet he loves me still.

HELENA: O that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill!

HERMIA: I give him curses, yet he gives me love.

HELENA: O that my prayers could such affection move!

HERMIA: The more I hate, the more he follows me.

HELENA: The more I love, the more he hateth me.

HERMIA: His folly, Helena, is no fault of mine.

HELENA: None, but your beauty: **would** that fault were mine!

1. *Would:* I wish

I frown...mine!: Hermia and Helena join in another formal duet.

HERMIA: Take comfort: he no more shall see my face;
Lysander and myself will **fly** this place.
Before the time I did Lysander see,
Seem'd Athens as a paradise to me:
O, then, what **graces** in my love do dwell,
That he hath turn'd a heaven unto a hell?

1. *Fly:* escape from
2. *Graces:* qualities.

LYSANDER: Helen, to you our **minds** we will **unfold:**
To-morrow night, when **Phoebe** doth behold
Her silver **visage** in the **watery glass,**
Decking with **liquid pearl** the bladed grass,
A time that lovers' flights doth **still** conceal,
Through Athens' gates have we **devis'd** to steal.

1. *Minds:* thoughts, plans
2. *Unfold:* open, explain
3. *Phoebe:* another name for Diana, goddess of the moon.
4. *Visage:* face
5. *Watery glass:* mirror made by a stretch of water (lake or pond)
6. *Decking:* trimming
7. *Liquid Pearl:* drops of dew (glistening like pearls); the Elizabethans thought that dew fell from the moon.
8. *Still:* always
9. *Devis'd:* planned

HERMIA: And in the wood, where often you and I
Upon **faint** primrose-beds were **wont** to lie,
Emptying our bosoms of their **counsel** sweet,
There my Lysander and myself shall meet;
And thence from Athens turn away our eyes,

To seek new friends and **stranger companies**.
Farewell, sweet playfellow: pray thou for us;
And good luck grant thee thy Demetrius!

Keep word, Lysander: we must starve our sight
From **lovers' food** till morrow deep midnight.

1. *Faint*: delicate. The primrose is a pale yellow, slightly scented flower of early spring.
2. *Wont*: accustomed.
3. *Counsel*: secrets
4. *Stranger companies*: the company of strangers
5. *Keep word*: keep your promise
6. *Lovers' food*: i.e. the sight of each other.

LYSANDER: I will, my Hermia.

[Exit Hermia]

Helena, adieu:

As you on him, Demetrius dote on you!

1. *As you on him, Demetrius dote on you*: may Demetrius love you as much as you love him.

[Exit Lysander]

HELENA: How happy some o'er other some can be!

Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know:
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities:
Things base and vile, **folding no quantity**,
Love can **transpose** to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the **mind**;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;
Wings and no eyes **figure unheedy** haste:
And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft **beguil'd**.
As **waggish** boys **in game themselves forswear**,
So **the boy Love is perjured every where**:
For **ere** Demetrius look'd on Hermia's **eyne**,
He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.
I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight:
Then to the wood will he to-morrow night
Pursue her; and for this **intelligence**
If I have thanks, it is **a dear expense**:
But herein mean I to enrich my pain,
To have his sight thither and back again.
[Exit]

1. *How happy some o'er (over) other some can be:* how happy some people are compared to others.
2. *Things base and vile, holding no quality, love can transpose to form and dignity:* the truth of this observation will be demonstrated in Act 3, when Titania falls in love with Bottom.
3. *Holding no quality:* having no value.
4. *Transpose:* transform
5. *Mind:* imagination, intelligence
6. *Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste:* and love's intelligence has no judgement.
7. *Figure:* represent
8. *Unheedy:* thoughtless
9. *Beguil'd:* deceived
10. *Waggish:* playful
11. *In game:* in fun
12. *Themselves forswear:* break promises.
13. *The boy Love is perjur'd everywhere:* love, like a little boy, breaks his promises everywhere.
14. *Ere:* until
15. *Eyne:* eyes
16. *Intelligence:* piece of information
17. *A dear expanse:* the phrase has several meanings: (i) it will cost Demetrius some effort to give thanks to Helena, but (ii) thanks from Demetrius will be precious to Helena, even though (iii) she has paid a high price for them (in betraying her friends).

Summary Scene 1

In the royal palace of Athens, Duke Theseus enters with the Amazon Queen Hippolyta, his fiancé, and Philostrate, his master of revels. Theseus tells Hippolyta he can barely wait the four days until their wedding. She assures him: "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time"(1.1.7-8).

- The wedding establishes the theme of love, while Hippolyta's response connects love to dreams.
- The idea that it's the nights, rather than the people, that will dream suggests dreams are more than just figments of imagination.

Theseus sends off Philostrate to organize entertainment for the wedding. After Philostrate leaves, Theseus says to Hippolyta that he won her love with his sword, but will wed her with revelry.

- Theseus and Hippolyta's love is founded in a battle of the sexes, literally. Theseus won her love by defeating her.

An angry Athenian nobleman Egeus, enters, with his daughter Hermia and her two suitors Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus explains to Theseus that he wants his daughter to marry Demetrius, but that she loves Lysander, who has "bewitched" her with songs of love and gifts. Egeus

asks the Duke to uphold the ancient law of Athens, which gives the father the right to pick his daughter's husband.

- Egeus is willing to watch his daughter die if she will not obey him.
- Note that even before the fairies appear, love is seen as a supernatural, external power that takes a person over and destroys reason.
 - It is also seen as anti-authoritarian.

Theseus speaks to Hermia, advising her to obey her father, and adding that Demetrius is a worthy man. When Hermia responds that Lysander is also worthy, Theseus says that Egeus's support of Demetrius makes him worthier.

- Theseus is fair, but as Duke he is also the embodiment of law and order.
 - And order in Athens is male dominance.

Hermia wishes her father could look at Lysander through her eyes, but Theseus responds, "Rather your eyes must with his [your father's] judgment look" (1.1.59).

- Hermia implies her eyes are already affected by love.
- Theseus wants her to see according to reason.

Hermia asks what will happen if she refuses to marry Demetrius. Theseus gives the following choices: become a nun, be put to death, or marry Demetrius. When Hermia says she will become a nun, Theseus advises her to think about it and give him her decision on his wedding day.

- Theseus seems much less willing than Egeus to execute Hermia, but he nevertheless supports the law and men's dominance over women, even in the face of love.

Demetrius asks Hermia to relent and marry him. But Lysander snaps that since Demetrius has Egeus's love, he should marry Egeus. Egeus, furious, vows to give what's his to Demetrius.

- Lysander comes down decidedly on the side of love over reason or law.

Lysander points out that he's as well born and wealthy as Demetrius. He adds that Demetrius is an inconstant lover: before he met Hermia, Demetrius wooed and won the heart of a woman named Helena.

- Up until this moment love was presented as only a good thing. But Demetrius's inconsistency shows it can also be hurtful.

Theseus admits he's disturbed by these facts, but says he cannot change the laws of Athens. He advises Hermia to obey her father, and tells Egeus and Demetrius to come with him, so he can discuss with them the plans for his wedding and give them some private advice.

- Again, Theseus stands up for law and order.
- Though he shows his compassion by advising Egeus and Demetrius to change their minds.

Now alone, Lysander and Hermia discuss the troubles lovers of history have had to face, from war and sickness to their ages being wrong for one another, to others choosing their love for them. Lysander describes such love as "short as any dream" (1.1.144) while Hermia decides that since all lovers face trials, they must face theirs.

- While Lysander and Hermia list the troubles that lovers face with grave sadness, the list makes it clear to the audience that they're just two more in a long line, which makes them seem silly.

Lysander comes up with a plan for the two of them to elope: they'll hide at his aunt's house, seven miles away from Athens. If they leave the Athenian city limits then the city's laws will no longer apply to them. They plan to meet in the woods outside Athens the next night.

- Note how similar Lysander and Hermia's plan is to Romeo and Juliet's in Romeo and Juliet.
- Though love is new and fresh to them, it's all been done and experienced before.

Just then, Hermia's childhood friend and Demetrius's former love, Helena, enters. She wishes she had Hermia's beauty so that Demetrius would love her. To make Helena feel better, Hermia tells her that she and Lysander are about to elope. The two lovers give Helena the details of their plan and wish her good luck with Demetrius.

- Love has put Hermia and Lysander in conflict with the law and made Helena miserable and shaken her self-confidence.
 - Note also how seriously these young lovers take themselves.
- Love destroys perspective.

Left alone on the stage, Helena gives a speech about the tricks love can play on one's eyes, transforming even "things base and vile" to "form and dignity." She notes that she is as beautiful as Hermia, but that Demetrius can't see it. And she adds that love is like an inconstant child: Demetrius once swore oaths of love to her and now loves Hermia. Helena decides to tell Demetrius about Hermia and Lysander's plan. She knows Demetrius will follow them into the woods, and that she's betraying her friend's trust, but hopes it will win her back Demetrius's love.

- Helena's speech shows that she fully understands the tricks that love can play on other people, and on oneself.
- She knows it can make someone blind to reason, and that it's not necessarily constant and true.
- She also knows that to tell Demetrius would be a terrible betrayal of her friend.

- And yet love is so powerful and overwhelming that she still decides to tell Demetrius.

SCENE II

Some Athenian workmen plan to produce a play for the wedding-day of Duke Theseus.

Athens, Peter Quince's house

[enter Quince the carpenter, Snug the joiner, Bottom the weaver, Flute the bellows-mender, Snout the tinker, and Starveling the tailor]

- The first rehearsal of the tradesmen's play. Quince must be diplomatic in handling Nick Bottom, who wants to act all the parts himself.

QUINCE: Is all our company here?

BOTTOM: You were best to call them **generally**, man by man, according to the **scrip**.

1. *Generally:* Bottom tries to sound important- but, he mistakes the meaning of words; here he should be saying 'severally' (= 'separately').
2. *Scrip:* list
3. It was customary in Elizabethan plays for comic characters of low social status to speak in prose.

QUINCE: Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our **interlude** before the duke and the duchess, on his wedding-day at night.

1. *Interlude:* play

BOTTOM: First, good Peter Quince, say what the play **treats on**, then read the names of the actors, and so **grow to a Point**.

1. *Treats on:* is about
2. *Grow to a point:* reach a conclusion

QUINCE: Marry, our play is, **The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe**.

1. *The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe:* Shakespeare parodies the elaborate titles of some earlier Elizabethan drama. (satirical quality to AMND).

BOTTOM: A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors **by the scroll**. Masters, **spread yourselves**.

1. *By the scroll*: according to the list
2. *Spread yourselves*: sit down.

QUINCE: Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver.

BOTTOM: Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.

QUINCE: You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.

BOTTOM: What is Pyramus? a lover, or a tyrant?

QUINCE: A lover, that kills himself most gallant for love.

BOTTOM: That will ask some tears in the true performing of it: if I do it, let the audience **look to their eyes**; I will move storms, I will **condole** in **some measure**. **To the rest**: yet **my chief humour is for a tyrant**: I could play **Ercles** rarely, or **a part to tear a cat in, to make all split**.

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates;
And **Phibbus' car**
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish **Fates**.

This was lofty! Now name the rest of the players. This is Ercles' vein, a tyrant's **vein**; a lover is more **condoling**.

1. *Look to their eyes*: be prepared to shed tears
2. *Condole*: lament
3. *Some measure*: to a certain extent
4. *To the rest*: now go on with the business
5. *My chief humour is that for a tyrant*: I would prefer to play a tyrant; I am best suited to the part of a tyrant.
6. *Ercles*: Hercules
7. *A part to tear a cat in, to make all split*: a part that demands violent action and language.
8. *Phibbus' car*: the chariot of the sun god, Phoebus, Apollo (APOLLO IN GREEK AS WELL).
9. *Fates*: the three sisters who (in classical mythology) determined the course of every man's life.
10. *The raging...Fates*: these lines burlesque the style of earlier verse and drama.
11. *Vein*: style
12. *Condoling*: pathetic

QUINCE: Francis Flute, the **bellows**-mender.

1. *Bellows*: an instrument used to blow air into organ pipes or (domestically) on to coals to make the fire ablaze.

FLUTE: Here, Peter Quince.

QUINCE: Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.

FLUTE: What is Thisbe? a wandering knight?

QUINCE: It is the lady that Pyramus must love.

FLUTE: Nay, **faith**, let me not play a woman; I have a beard coming.

1. *Faith:* by my faith

QUINCE: **That's all one:** you shall play it in a **mask**, and you may speak as **small** as you will.

1. *That's all one:* that doesn't matter.

2. *Mask:* fashionable ladies often wore masks to protect their complexions when they went outdoors.

3. *Small:* shrill (like a woman's voice)

BOTTOM: **And** I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too, I'll speak in a monstrous little voice. '**Thisne, Thisne;**' '**Ah, Pyramus, lover dear! thy Thisbe dear, and lady dear!**'

1. *And:* if

2. *Thisne...dear:* Bottom tried to vary his voice, speaking as both Pyramus and Thisbe.

QUINCE: No, no; you must play Pyramus: and, Flute, you Thisbe.

BOTTOM: Well, proceed.

QUINCE: Robin Starveling, the tailor.

STARVELING: Here, Peter Quince.

QUINCE: Robin Starveling, you must play Thisbe's mother. Tom Snout, the tinker.

SNOUT: Here, Peter Quince.

QUINCE: You, **Pyramus' father: myself, Thisbe's father:** Snug, the joiner; you, the lion's part: and, I hope, here is a play **fitted.**

1. *Pyramus...father:* neither of these characters appear in the final performance.

2. *Fitted:* cast

SNUG: Have you the lion's part written? pray you, if it be, give

it me, for I am **slow of study**.

1. *Slow of study*: a slow learner

QUINCE: You may do it **extempore**, for it is nothing but roaring.

1. *Extempore*: without a script, spontaneously.

BOTTOM: Let me play the lion too: I will roar, **that** I will do any man's heart good to hear me; I will roar, that I will make the duke say 'Let him roar again, let him roar again.'

1. *That*: so that.

QUINCE: **And** you should do it too terribly, you would **fright** the duchess and the ladies, **that** they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all.

1. *And*: if
2. *Fright*: frighten
3. *That*: so that

ALL: That would hang us, every mother's son.

BOTTOM: I grant you, friends, if that you should fright the ladies out of their wits, they would have **no more discretion** but to hang us: but I will aggravate my voice so that I will **roar you** as gently as any **sucking dove**; I will roar you **and 'twere** any **nightingale**.

1. *No more discretion*: Bottom wants to say "no other choice", but his words mean "no more sense".
2. *Roar you*: roar for you.
3. *Sucking dove*: Bottom confuses two models of gentleness- the sucking lamb and the sitting dove.
4. *'Twere*: as though it were
5. *Nightingale*: a small bird that sings very sweetly in the evening.

QUINCE: You can play no part but Pyramus; for Pyramus is a **sweet-faced** man; a **proper** man, as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely gentleman-like man: therefore you **must needs** play Pyramus.

1. *Sweet-faced*: handsome
2. *Proper*: masculine
3. *Must needs*: must certainly.

BOTTOM: Well, I will undertake it. What beard were I best to play it in?

QUINCE: Why, what you will.

BOTTOM: I will **discharge** it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-**in-grain** beard,

or your **French-crown-colour** beard, your perfect yellow.

1. *Discharge*: perform
2. *In-grain*: deeply dyed
3. *French-crown-colour*: light gold, the colour of French coin.

QUINCE: Some of your French crowns have no hair at all, and then you will play bare-faced. But, masters, here are your parts: and **I am to** entreat you, request you and desire you, to **con** them by tomorrow night; and meet me in the palace wood, a mile **without** the town, by moonlight; there will we rehearse, for if we meet in the city, we shall be **dogged** with company, and our **devices** known. In the meantime I will draw a **bill** of **properties**, such as our play wants. I pray you, fail me not.

1. *Some...all*: some French men have bald heads; Quince is making a popular joke about the hair loss caused by syphilis (which the Elizabethans call "the French disease")
2. *I am to*: I must
3. *Con*: learn
4. *Without*: outside
5. *Dogged*: followed
6. *Devices*: plans
7. *Bill*: list
8. *Properties*: stage equipment.

BOTTOM: We will meet; and there we may rehearse most **obscenely** and courageously. Take **pains; be perfect: adieu**.

1. *Obscenely*: Bottom perhaps means "unseen", or "seemly", (=properly).
2. *Pains*: care
3. *Be perfect*: know your parts perfectly.
4. *Adieu*: farewell (Bottom has learned a French word).

QUINCE: At the duke's oak we meet.

BOTTOM: Enough; **hold or cut bow-strings**.

1. *Hold or cut bow-strings*: the meaning of this phrase is unknown, but Bottom appears to be saying that the actors must keep their promises ('hold'), or else be disgraced.

[Exeunt]

Summary Scene 2

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of common labourers including Snug (a joiner), Bottom (a weaver), Flute (a bellows-mender), Snout (a tinker), and Starveling (a tailor) meet at the house of Peter Quince, a carpenter. They are meeting about the play they hope to perform as part of the celebration for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding: The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.

- With the labourer's and their play, A Midsummer Night's Dream introduces its theme of a play within a play.
- And just from the title of the play it's clear that the labourers are not destined to be great actors.
 - A lamentable comedy?

As Quince tries to conduct the meeting, Nick Bottom constantly interrupts with advice. Quince calls out each man's name and his role in the play. Bottom is to play Pyramus. Bottom asks if Pyramus is "a lover or a tyrant" (1.2.21). When Quince says a lover who dies for love, Bottom boasts about the tears he'll draw from the audience, though he adds he'd be even better as a tyrant.

- Bottom's constant interruptions show both that he considers himself an authority on the theater and that in this estimation of himself he's very, very wrong.
- Note also that this play about lovers dying for love is almost identical to the situation faced by Lysander and Hermia.

Quince continues to call out names and roles. Flute is slated to play the part of Thisbe, but Flute doesn't want to play a woman's part because he has a beard growing. Quince decides that Flute will play the role in a mask. Bottom again interrupts, asking to be allowed to play Thisbe as well as Pyramus, and showing how he can speak like a woman. Quince says no.

- Flute's dilemma about his beard interfering with his ability to play a woman mocks the Elizabethan rule that only men could be actors, meaning that all women's roles were also played by men.
- Bottom continues to want to be the center of attention.

Quince continues handing out parts. Starveling: Thisbe's mother. Snout: Thisbe's father. When Quince announces Snug will be the lion, Bottom begs to be allowed to play the lion. He brags about how loud he'll roar. After Quince objects that he might scare the ladies and get them all hanged, Bottom promises to roar as gently as a dove or nightingale. Quince again says Bottom can only play Pyramus, at which Bottom goes into extended thought about what color beard he should wear.

- Beyond the fact that roaring as gently as a nightingale is a funny idea, the labourer's misunderstanding about theater is important.
- They seem to think that the audience can't distinguish between fiction and reality.
- Through this mistake, they point out how crucial the audience's willing suspension of disbelief is to a play.

To ensure privacy, Quince asks them all to meet him in the forest near the palace that night. There, they will rehearse.

- Now both the actors and the lovers will be in the forest tomorrow night.

