A Midsummer Night's Dream

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Unlike many of Shakespeare's plays, there's no single source for the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But Shakespeare did take various tales and characters from a wide number of sources and stitch them together to create his play. For instance, the characters of Theseus and Hippolyta come from an English translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, the tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and the name of Titania comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of a man turned into an ass is told in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, and Oberon's name comes from a medieval French romance entitled *Huon of Bordeaux*. Further, a plot that hinges on two lovers fighting to marry according to their will and in defiance of their fathers was standard in both Greek and Roman drama (and also drove the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- **When Written:** Early to mid 1590s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1600 (though it was first performed earlier, probably between 1594-96).
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Comic drama
- **Setting:** The city of Athens and the forest just outside, in some distant, ancient time when it was ruled by the mythological hero Theseus.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

A Midsummer Night's Parallel. Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* around the same time he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare mocks tragic love stories through the escapades of the lovers in the forests and the ridiculous version of *Pyramus and Thisbe* (a tragic romance from Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*) that Bottom and his company perform. So at the same time Shakespeare was writing the greatest love story ever told, he was also mocking the conventions of such love stories. It's almost as if Shakespeare was saying, "Yeah, it's tired, it's old, and I can still do it better than anyone else ever could."

PLOT SUMMARY

In the palace in ancient Athens, Duke Theseus and his fiancé Hippolyta are planning their wedding festivities when Egeus, an Athenian nobleman, arrives. Egeus has with him his daughter, Hermia, and two men, Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus wants Hermia to marry Demetrius, but Hermia loves Lysander. Egeus asks Theseus to uphold Athenian law, which forces a woman to marry the man her father chooses or be executed. Lysander points out that Demetrius is an inconstant lover, who had until recently loved Hermia's childhood friend Helena before falling for Hermia, but Theseus says he must uphold the law, and exits. Lysander and Hermia decide to elope by escaping into the forest outside Athens. They tell only Helena of their plans, but she tells Demetrius in order to try to regain his love.

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of manual laborers discuss a play, *Pyramus and Thisbe* that they hope to perform at the Duke's wedding. Bottom, a weaver with many ridiculous opinions about acting, gets the part of Pyramus. The group agrees to rehearse in the forest outside Athens. Meanwhile, in the forest, Oberon, the king of the Fairies, is fighting with his queen, Titania, over possession of a beautiful Indian changeling boy. Oberon decides to punish his wife for refusing to obey him. He sends his servant, Robin Goodfellow, a mischievous fairy also known as Puck, to bring him the love-in-idleness flower. The magical **juice** from this flower causes a person (or fairy) to fall in love with the first thing he or she sees. Just then, Oberon sees Helena following Demetrius through the forest and hears him threaten to abandon her. Oberon decides to make

Demetrius love Helena and tells Puck to put the love juice on the **eyes** of the man in Athenian clothes. Oberon then sneaks up to the sleeping Titania and drops the potion on her eyes.

As all this is going on, Lysander and Hermia get lost in the forest, and find a place to sleep, apart, for the night. Puck sees Lysander's Athenian clothes, and puts the love juice on his eyelids. Nearby, Demetrius finally abandons Helena. Lysander wakes, sees Helena, and falls in love. Helena thinks Lysander is mocking her with his declarations of love, and stalks off. Lysander follows. A moment later, Hermia wakes up. Shocked that Lysander would abandon her, she goes to search for him.

The laborers rehearse their play in the forest, close to where Titania sleeps. They can't remember their lines or cues, amusing Puck, who's watching them. Puck transforms Bottom's head into the head of an ass; the other laborers, terrified, run away. Not knowing what's happened, and thinking his friends ran away as a joke, Bottom sings to show he isn't frightened. His song wakes up Titania. She falls instantly in love.

Oberon is pleased with Puck's work, until he discovers that Puck put the love juice in Lysander's rather than Demetrius's eyes. He sends Puck to bring Helena to Demetrius, and puts the love potion in Demetrius's eyes. Helena arrives, followed by Lysander. Demetrius wakes, and falls in love. Both men argue over who deserves Helena, while she now thinks they're both mocking her. Hermia then shows up, and is furious that Lysander is now wooing Helena. Soon Hermia and Helena are on the verge of fighting. When the men go off to duel in the forest, Helena runs. Hermia chases her. Oberon sends Puck out to make sure no one hurts each other. Puck uses his trickery to get them all to fall asleep in the same small glade, and then puts the love juice on Lysander's eyelids so he'll love Hermia again. Titania, meanwhile, is still doting on Bottom, and has given Oberon the changeling. While she sleeps, Oberon removes the spell, and Puck removes Bottom's ass-head.

On a hunting expedition in the forest, Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus encounter the four sleeping lovers. When Lysander admits that he and Hermia were eloping, Egeus insists that the law be brought down on their heads. But Theseus sees that Lysander now loves Hermia while Demetrius loves Helena, and says the four lovers can marry at his wedding. At the same time, Bottom returns to Athens just as the laborers were starting to despair they wouldn't be able to perform their play because they had no Pyramus.

As entertainment after the wedding, the Duke chooses to watch the laborer's play. It is terrible and ridiculous, but the Duke and lovers enjoy making fun of it. After the three married couples go to bed, the Fairies enter and bless the marriages.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Robin Goodfellow (Puck) — A type of fairy called a "puck," Puck is Oberon's faithful servant, but is also mischievous and enjoys nothing more than playing tricks and causing trouble. He has all sorts of magical abilities, from changing shape, to turning invisible, to assuming different people's voices, to transforming a man's head into an ass's head. He is not, however, beyond making a mistake, as his mix-up between Demetrius and Lysander makes clear.

Nick Bottom — A weaver who's supreme confidence in his acting skill convinces the other laborers to give him the lead role of Pyramus in their version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. In fact, Bottom is a seriously incompetent actor who understands neither his lines nor theater in general. All this makes him a profoundly funny character. Because he has no idea he's incompetent, he never ceases to make long, overly dramatic speeches filled with incorrect references and outright absurdities. Even when Puck transforms his head into an ass's head, Bottom fails to realize it and takes it as unsurprising when Titania falls in love with him. Yet though Bottom is certainly extremely foolish and self-important, he means well.

Hermia — The daughter of Egeus and the beloved of Lysander and Demetrius (at least at the beginning of the play). She is strong-willed, believes in her right to choose her husband based on love, and is fiercely loyal. When crossed, Hermia can become a downright vixen. Hermia is beautiful and has dark hair, though she's small in stature and somewhat sensitive about it.

Helena — She loves Demetrius, and at one time he returned her love. But before the play begins, he fell in love with Hermia and left Helena in despair. Because of Demetrius's abandonment of her, Helena lacks self-confidence and self-respect, going so far as to tell Demetrius that she'll love and follow him even if he treats her like his dog. She's also a bit conniving and desperate, willing to betray her friend Hermia's confidence in order to try to win back Demetrius's love. Physically, she's tall and blond.

Lysander — An Athenian nobleman who loves Hermia. In many ways, he is the model of a constant lover. He risks death under Athenian law by coming up with the plan to elope into the woods with Hermia, and only strays from his loyalty to Hermia under the influence of the love juice. When the effect of the spell is removed, he returns to his true love.

Demetrius — An Athenian nobleman who also loves Hermia. Unlike Lysander, Demetrius is an inconstant lover. Before the events of the play, he wooed Helena, then rejected her and pursued Hermia. He can be cruel at times, as when he threatens to abandon Helena in the forest, and there's no indication he would ever have come to return Helena's love without the influence of the love potion.

Oberon — The King of the Fairies and Titania's husband. Oberon is willful and demands obedience from his subjects,

including his wife. When he's angry, he's not above using magic and plots to manipulate and humiliate in order to get his way. Yet at the same time he also seems to like using magic to fix problems he sees around him, particularly those having to do with love. He's had numerous extra-marital affairs.

Titania — The Queen of the Fairies and Oberon's wife. Titania is strong willed and independent, willing to fight her husband for control of the changeling boy. She is also powerful. Her fight with her husband causes nature to act strangely, and her fairies always follow her commands. She is not, however, immune to the power of the juice from the love-in-idleness flower. As a lover, she is doting, though jealous. It also seems that, like her husband, through the years she's had many an extra-marital amorous affair.

Theseus — The Duke of Athens and the fiancé and later the husband of Hippolyta, Theseus is a strong and responsible leader who tries to be fair and sensitive. Though it is his duty to uphold the law, and he does so when both Lysander and Demetrius love Hermia, as soon as the lovers sort themselves out, he overrules Egeus' demand that Hermia marry Demetrius and let the lovers decide for themselves whom to marry. He also treats the laborers decently, despite the fact that their play is atrocious. Though a fearsome warrior (he captured Hippolyta, an Amazon queen, in battle), he is devoted to making her happy. Theseus is, however, extremely literal-minded, and gives little credence to the "fantasies" the lovers recount of their night in the forest.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hippolyta — The Queen of the Amazons and Theseus's fiancé, she is both a fearsome warrior and a loving woman. She also has good common sense and is willing to disagree with Theseus's assessments of events and to calm him down when he can't wait for their marriage.

Egeus — Hermia's father, Egeus is an overbearing and rigid man who cares more about what he wants than his daughter's desires. He is so vain and uncaring, he is willing to let his daughter die if she won't do as he tells her.

Peter Quince — A carpenter and the director and main writer of the laborer's version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. In *Pyramus and Thisbe*, he plays the Prologue.

Francis Flute — A bellows-mender who plays the part of Thisbe in *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Tom Snout — A tinker who plays the part of Wall in *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Snug — A joiner who plays the part of Lion in *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Robin Starveling — A tailor who plays the part of Moonshine in *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Philostrate — The Master of Revels for *Theseus*, he's in charge of arranging entertainments for the court.

Peaseblossom — One of Titania's fairies.

Cobweb — One of Titania's fairies.

Mote — One of Titania's fairies.

Mustardseed — One of Titania's fairies.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play about love. All of its action—from the escapades of Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena in the forest, to the argument between Oberon and Titania, to the play about two lovelorn youths that Bottom and his friends perform at Duke Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta—are motivated by love. But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not a romance, in which the audience gets caught up in a passionate love affair between two characters. It's a comedy, and because it's clear from the outset that it's a comedy and that all will turn out happily, rather than try to overcome the audience with the exquisite and overwhelming passion of love, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* invites the audience to laugh at the way the passion of love can make people blind, foolish, inconstant, and desperate. At various times, the power and passion of love threatens to destroy friendships, turn men against men and women against women, and through the argument between Oberon and Titania throws nature itself into turmoil.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, love is a force that characters cannot control, a point amplified by workings of the love potion, which literally makes people slaves to love. And yet, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends happily, with three marriages blessed by the reconciled fairy King and Queen. So even as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes fun of love's effects on both men and women and points out that when it comes to love there's nothing really new to say, its happy ending reaffirms loves importance, beauty, and timeless relevance.

PLAYS WITHIN PLAYS

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play containing other plays. The most obvious example is the laborers' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and their inept production serves three important functions in the larger structure of the larger play. First, the laborer's mistakes and misunderstandings introduce a strand of farce to the

comedy of the larger play. Second, it allows Shakespeare to comment on the nature of art and theater, primarily through the laborer's own confused belief that the audience won't be able to distinguish between fiction and reality. Third, the laborers' play parodies much of the rest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Pyramus and Thisbe are lovers who, facing opposition from their parents, elope, just as Hermia and Lysander do. So even as the lovers and Theseus make fun of the laborers' ridiculous performance, the audience, which is watching the lovers watch the laborers' play, is aware that the lovers had been just as absurd.

A Midsummer Night's Dream also contains a second, subtler, play within a play. In this play within a play, Oberon is playwright, and he seeks to "write" a comedy in which Helena gets her love, Lysander and Hermia stay together, Titania learns a lesson in wifely obedience, and all conflicts are resolved through marriage and reconciliation. And just as the laborers' play turns a tragic drama into a comic farce, so does Oberon's when Puck accidentally puts the **love-potion** on the **eyes** of the wrong Athenian man. And yet Oberon's play also serves a counter purpose to the laborers' play. While the laborers' awful performance seems to suggest the limit of the theater, Oberon's play, which rewrote the lives of the same mortals who mock the laborers' play, suggests that theater really does have a magic that defies reality.

DREAMS

After their surreal night of magic and mayhem in the forest, both the lovers and Bottom describe what happened to them as a "dream." They use the word "dream" to describe their experiences, because they wouldn't otherwise be able to understand the bizarre and irrational things that they remember happening to them in the forest. By calling their experiences dreams, Bottom and the lovers allow those experiences to exist as they are, without need for explanation or understanding. As Bottom says: "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream"(IV.i.200-201). In a famous speech near the end of the play, Duke Theseus brushes off the lovers' tale of their night in the forest, and goes so far as to condemn the imagination of all lovers, madmen, and poets as full of illusion and untruths. But Theseus's argument overlooks that it is reason, as set down in the law of Athens, that caused all the problems to begin with. And it was the "dream" within the forest that solved those problems. Through this contrast, the play seems to be suggesting that dreams and imagination are as useful as reason, and can sometimes create truths that transcend reason's limits.

MEN AND WOMEN

The relationship between men and women echoes across both the mortal and fairy worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. More specifically, both the fairy and mortal plots in the play deal with an attempt by male authority figures to control women. Though Theseus and Hippolyta appear to share a healthy loving relationship, it is a love built upon a man asserting power over a woman: Theseus won Hippolyta's love by defeating her in battle. Oberon creates the love juice in an attempt to control his disobedient wife. Egeus seeks to control his daughter's marriage. And while the play ends happily, with everyone either married or reconciled, the love on display is of a very particular kind: it is a love in which women accept a role subservient to their husbands. To a modern audience this likely seems rather offensive, but an Elizabethan audience would have generally accepted that men are the head of the household just as the king is the head of society.

Also, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests that love can also take a terrible toll on same-sex friendships. Even before the lovers get into the forest, Helena betrays her friend Hermia for love. And once they do get into the forest, all the intense feelings nearly cause the men to duel and brings the women almost to blows as well.

THE SUPERNATURAL

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare has created a fantastical world of fairies and magic. And this world is not just a pretty backdrop for the events of the play. The fairies and their magic are the engine of the plot: Oberon's love juice sets the plot in motion, Puck's mistakes applying the juice and his mischievous transformation of Bottom's head into an ass's head complicates it, and Puck's tricks and illusions to keep the mortals while he fixes his love juice errors bring everything to a resolution. And in the face of this magic, mortal dilemmas such as the laws of Athens fall away.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LOVE JUICE

In its supernatural power to make one person fall in love with another no matter their previous desires, statements, status, or power, the love juice symbolizes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s vision of love as an irrational, unpredictable, and downright fickle force that completely overwhelms and transforms people, whether they want it to or

not.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* published in 2004.

Act 1, scene 1 Quotes

But earthlier happy is the rose distilled
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness. (76)

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Hermia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.78-80

Explanation and Analysis

Hermia asks Theseus what her options will be if she does not marry Demetrius. He explains that the only alternatives are to become a nun or to be put to death but recommends that she elect marriage.

This quote displays the high value in the play placed on romantic love and on marriage. Theseus uses the image of "the rose" to stand for Hermia, and more generally for young women. To be "distilled" may mean literally to be purified and condensed into a single essence, but symbolically it means for her to select a single lover on whom to bestow her love. In this metaphor, "withering on the virgin thorn" means to remain celibate as she would in a convent. In that case, her life would be reduced to the simple progression of "Grows, lives, and dies" because it would be unmarked by significant amorous events. Thus life could be deemed a "single blessedness" because it would involve no meaningful shifts. Theseus recommends against such celibate monotony and encourages Hermia to instead marry Demetrius.

By couching his advice in the metaphor of the rose, however, Theseus makes a comment not just on Hermia, but rather more broadly on womanhood and romantic relationships. His justification, intriguingly, comes from whether one will be "earthlier happy" rather than from any religious or legal framework. Theseus thus shows himself to be acting not only out of deference to Athenian laws, but also out of a personal belief in the merit of romantic love. Shakespeare thus establishes the centrality of romance to the way these characters will act and find meaning in the world.

She, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
Upon this spotted and inconstant man. (109)

Related Characters: Lysander (speaker), Helena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.110-112

Explanation and Analysis

Lysander speaks up and begins to defend his right to marry Hermia. He observes that Demetrius first won the favor Hermia's friend Helena and is therefore a fickle lover.

To make his case, Lysander places Helena's piousness in opposition with Demetrius' capricious nature. In just two lines he says the word "dotes" three times to refer to Helena, each time with greater gusto. First, the verb is left unmodified; then he appends the adverb "devoutly" to underline the extent of Helena's commitment; and finally he adds "in idolatry" to cast her behavior as entirely subservient. Demetrius, in contrast, is "spotted and inconstant" because he has deviated in his love. "Spotted" makes use of a physical image to show that the love is marred or impure, while "inconstant" more directly refers to mercurial behavior. That Lysander sees this behavior as justification for why Demetrius should not be with Hermia offers insight into the moral sensibilities of these characters. Although they may prize romantic love, greater value is seen in a consistent affection.

At the same time, however, Helena's affection as it is described here seems overly devout. The language used to describe her also offers a subtle allusion to earlier idea that Hermia may enter a nunnery rather than marry Demetrius. That Helena's love is presented in similarly religious terms shows how parallels exist in the types of devotion. Yet the one-sidedness of her "idolatry" calls into question its romantic efficacy. Thus while Lysander may charge Demetrius with overly fickle tendencies, he also subtly mocks Hermia for being *too* devoted. True romance, it seems, must exist between these two poles.

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. (132)

Related Characters: Lysander (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.134-136

Explanation and Analysis

Hermia and Lysander discuss their troubling situation in the aftermath of the confrontation with Theseus. Lysander observes that their predicament is not unusual, for it is characteristic of troubles faced by other lovers throughout history.

Lysander speaks in a grandiose tone that claims understanding of a wide range of context. "Ay me" expresses a strong sense of woe, while "for aught" is an emphatic expression that in contemporary English would be similar to "for all" or "in all." Lysander is thus referring to the sum total of narratives with which he has come into contact. He considers both written and oral texts, both fictions and histories—and arrives at this summarizing, grand pronouncement.

Yet if the tone might seem to inflate the importance of his own romance, the content of the sentence normalizes it. To observe that "true love never did run smooth" in any of these tales is to show how his case with Hermia is consistent with those previous stories. Instead of seeing their love to be particularly woeful, he contends that it is characteristic of a common trend. Shakespeare thus places the story told in *Midsummer Night's Dream*in a cultural history of other similar romantic stories. He presents the tale of Hermia and Lysander as typical of great romances, while implying that the characters themselves are aware of this similarity—and will act based on those older narratives. At the same time, the play, being a comedy, will play with and make fun of these traditional narratives of "fated lovers."

> 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, holding no quantity,
> Love can transpose to form and dignity.
> Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
> And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind. (227)

Related Characters: Helena (speaker), Hermia, Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.233-241

Explanation and Analysis

After Hermia and Lysander leave to elope, Helena gives this moving soliloquy. She notes that love causes people to see incorrectly and act irrationally.

To make this point, Helena first compares two supposedly objective features: her beauty and Hermia's. She reasons that if so many people "thought [her] as fair" as Hermia, then Demetrius' perspective must be warped. He "errs" because he incorrectly favors Hermia though nothing about her would seem superior to Helena. Helena then applies the same type of criticism back on herself: Just as Demetrius' assessment of Hermia's physical beauty is marred by his love, so is Helena's assessment of Demtrius' character. What is "base and vile" becomes "form and dignity." Intriguingly, in this speech Helena shows herself capable of recognizing her limitations. She observes how warped her perspective has become. Yet, even as she is aware how love has affected her, she is unable to escape its power and continues to see Demetrius as all "form and dignity."

Helena's use of imagery pertaining to eyes here is worth noting. She references how Demetrius focuses on "Hermia's eyes" as the basis for his love, yet observes that "Love looks not with the eyes"—for it does not correctly visually interpret the world. As a result, Cupid is "painted blind" because he represents a force that acts based on emotion rather than vision. Later in the play, however, the characters will fall in love when a potion is applied to their eyes—which will make them enamored with the first person they see. Helena's claim that vision is unimportant is thus both accurate and ironic, for Shakespeare will make literal sight the basis for love's metaphorical blindness.

Act 1, scene 2 Quotes

> 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 humor 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 Phoebus' 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. (12)

Related Characters: Nick Bottom (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.23-39

Explanation and Analysis

A set of fellow novice actors discuss their upcoming play *Pyramus and Thisbe*. One of them, Bottom, pompously describes his acting talents and presents a short monologue to back up that claim.

Though the tone of this passage is difficult to capture in text alone, Bottom and his fellow actors are meant to be ridiculously comic, bumbling characters. His pronouncements are overly ornate and self-aggrandizing: He claims to be able to provide the "tears" desired by audience members, but also to "move storms" or physically change the environment. Despite his profession as a weaver, he claims to have a natural affinity for "a tyrant" and implies that the audience will need a measure of "condoling" after his performance because it will be so moving.

The ridiculous quality of these claims is made more evident by the example monologue that Bottom delivers. His close adherence to the end-rhymes comes off as sing-song and childish in nature, while the brevity of each line sabotages the grand images he purports to convey. Some of the images are themselves nonsensical. Rocks do not rage, and shocks do not shiver; in fact it would be more logical to speak of shivering rocks and raging shocks. Similarly, it is Bottom who is far more "foolish" than the Fates. Shakespeare establishes the farcical quality of Bottom and his fellow troop. At the same time, through Bottom and his troupe, Shakespeare begins to good-naturedly mock the conventions of tragic romances as well as theater more generally.

Act 2, scene 1 Quotes

❝ Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
You are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Called Robin Goodfellow. (19)

Related Characters: Robin Goodfellow (Puck)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.33-35

Explanation and Analysis

The setting of the play shifts from the human center of Athens to the mystical forest. There, a fairy encounters another figure and inquires about his identity.

Though this passage might seem to be a perfunctory interaction between two characters, it also develops important themes relating to deception and identity. The fairy, for instance, introduces recognition by way of mis-recognition: The line "mistake your shape and making quite" serves as an odd and inverted greeting. When the fairy does seek to identity Robin, he begins not with his name but with a description of how he is "shrewd and knavish"—both terms that connote deception and lack of predictability.

Robin's name is itself rather slippery. The supposed moral constancy implied by the name "Goodfellow" directly contrasts with the previous description of him as being "knavish," and the fairy will soon bestow on this "Robin Goodfellow" the nickname of Puck. This interaction thus shows how fickle identity becomes in the forest setting. By directly juxtaposing Act One's urban affairs with this transition into the mystical realm, Shakespeare sets this space starkly apart—as an environment for the characters to take on new identities.

❝ We cannot fight for love, as men may do;
We should be wooed and were not made to woo.
I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell,
to die upon the hand I love so well. (226)

Related Characters: Helena (speaker), Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.248-251

Explanation and Analysis

Helena has followed Demetrius into the woods and continues to profess her affection. She reflects on how this behavior is not in line with traditional social norms, for such pursuits are normally the realm of men, not women.

This passage shows how Helena is entrapped by traditional gender roles even as she tries to reject them. She describes, poignantly, how her active pursuit of Demetrius is something only "men may do." And the term "fight" casts the pursuit of love in military terms, reiterating how it is a traditionally masculine enterprise. Shes describes the roles as being strictly divided between "should be wooed" and "made to woo"—pursuer and pursued—showing that Helena has internalized the traditional divisions.

Yet her response is, rather remarkably, defiance rather than

defeat. She affirms first her own action "I'll follow thee" and then more radically "make a heaven of hell": This expression refers most simply to how she wants to improve her current horrific state of affairs. But more radically it implies that she hopes to invert the world order in which she cannot be the wooer. Indeed, her use of the violent reference to death places her in the traditional masculine role. Shakespeare thus presents Helena as a character who staunchly rejects the passive feminine role to which she has been assigned.

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine:
There sleeps Titania some time of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in. (235)

Related Characters: Oberon (speaker), Titania

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.257-264

Explanation and Analysis

After watching Helena and Demetrius' interaction, Oberon plots how to resolve their conflict at the same time as playing his prank on Titania. He describes to Puck his plan to make use of a flower that makes people fall in love.

Oberon's language here is lush and evocative. He references a variety of different exotic plants at the site where the potion will be found, describing a scene of splendor and vibrance. Forming the speech from sets of rhyming couplets renders it deeply entrancing—thus foreshadowing the way the flowers' juice will bewitch the lovers. (Note how the eloquence of Oberon's rhymes is deeply in contrast with Bottom's in Act 1 Scene 2.) That Titania is "Lull'd in these flowers" similarly foreshadows how flowers will be the instruments of enchantment for those who sleep.

Yet within this tranquil environment Oberon describes, the reference to the "snake" carries a slightly more insidious note—in particular since the following reference is to entrapment: "Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in." Oberon could be showing here how the enchanting and luscious environment can at once carry darker notes of entrapment. Yet the play will ultimately only make those darker notes instruments of enjoyable deceit rather than true manipulation.

Act 2, scene 2 Quotes

When thou wakest, it is thy dear:
Wake when some vile thing is near. (22)

Related Characters: Oberon (speaker), Titania

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.39-40

Explanation and Analysis

Oberon has snuck past Titania's attendants as she sleeps. He places the love potion on her eyes and hopes she will spy something unpleasant when she wakes up.

These lines describe succinctly the way the love potion will affect Titania. Whatever she sees when she stops sleeping will be her "dear": the thing she loves the most. And thus Oberon hopes that what she spies will be "vile," causing her to fall in love with some odious being. By rhyming "dear" with "near," he draws attention to the way that Titania's love will be predicated on proximity rather than real romantic sentiment. Indeed, the rhyme is important to note here, for it presents these lines as sonorous rather than actually sinister. As is characteristic of this comedy, the plot resists entering a truly negative realm. Even as Oberon moves to deceive Titania, his lighthearted tone presents the behavior to be a mere dalliance or game.

Act 3, scene 2 Quotes

When in that moment, so it came to pass,
Titania waked and straightway loved an ass. (33)

Related Characters: Robin Goodfellow (Puck) (speaker), Nick Bottom, Titania

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.2.35-36

Explanation and Analysis

The first being that Titania sees when she awakes is a bewitched Bottom who now has the head of a donkey. Puck explains those events to Oberon with what might be best described as delighted glee.

These lines fulfill Oberon's earlier hope that Titania would spy something "vile" when she awoke. Indeed, his wish seems to have been fulfilled far beyond his hopes. For she has fallen in love not only with a "vile" human but actually a partial animal: an "ass" both in name (Bottom) and body. That Puck conveys this information with his characteristic singsong tone presents it to be lighthearted. But beyond that levity, he also adopts the distanced perspective of a theater director or storyteller. Puck describes Titania's actions—"so it came to pass"—as if they were performed by a character in a different tale. Thus he presents himself and Oberon as the creators of the plot events being watched by the audience. Shakespeare forefronts, in this way, how people can function as playwrights, scripting their lives and those of others from a distanced point of view.

> Lord, what fools these mortals be! (117)

Related Characters: Robin Goodfellow (Puck) (speaker), Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.117

Explanation and Analysis

Puck has just seen Helena being pursued by Lysander—and both are about to enter the stage with Demetrius. He correctly expects that the two will compete for her love and looks forward to the show.

This line corroborates the way Puck sees himself as a theater director for the events that transpire—as opposed to a character directly involved in the narrative. Describing the other characters as "mortals" sets up a clear divide between the supernatural forest creatures and the normal humans. And considering them to be "fools" places them in a position of subservience: They are following the pre-designed games of Oberon and Puck rather than acting of their own independent accord. As a result, Puck is able to look on the behavior of Helena and her two new lover's with pure whimsy, for their issues exist in a distanced and, for him, meaningless realm. Shakespeare thus shows that adopting a removed perspective allows one to aestheticize and find humorous what might otherwise be a dramatic or painful series of events. And, of course, the audience of the play gets an extra thrill of delight as they – the ultimate viewers with a removed perspective – watch Puck watching the "mortals."

> O spite! O hell! I see you all are bent
> To set against me for your merriment:
> If you we re civil and knew courtesy,
> You would not do me thus much injury.
> Can you not hate me, as I know you do,
> But you must join in souls to mock me too?
> If you were men, as men you are in show,
> You would not use a gentle lady so;
> To vow, and swear, and superpraise my parts,
> When I am sure you hate me with your hearts.
> You both are rivals, and love Hermia;
> And now both rivals, to mock Helena:
> A trim exploit, a manly enterprise,
> To conjure tears up in a poor maid's eyes
> With your derision! none of noble sort
> Would so offend a virgin, and extort
> A poor soul's patience, all to make you sport. (147)

Related Characters: Helena (speaker), Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.148-164

Explanation and Analysis

Helena is now being pursued by Lysander and Demetrius after they have both been bewitched by the love potion. Believing that they are making fun of her, Helena spurns their advances and scolds them for this behavior.

This soliloquy makes a sharp distinction between courteous and uncourteous forms of behavior. Helena considers Lysander and Demetrius' actions to do her "injury" and "mock" her because, she believes, their behaviors do not accurately represent how they feel. To support this point, Shakespeare uses the language of performance and play: The men act from "merriment," they act "in show," and it is all done "to make you sport." These descriptions corroborate the way Puck and Oberon have staged their own sport of romance in the play. Helena is correctly able to recognize the falsehood in the mens' behaviors, but she cannot recognize that they are merely characters acting out their parts. And, meanwhile, the men have become so overwhelmed by their "parts" because of the love potion,

that they don't even know that they are in fact playing parts.

Helena's speech also confirms the way she is ever-aware of gender role complexity. She implicitly denies Lysander and Demetrius's manhood by saying they are men "in show" rather than in actuality (which also would have been funny in Shakespeare's time, when women weren't allowed to be actors and so the actor playing Helena would, in fact, have been a man). And calling their behavior "A trim exploit, a manly enterprise" is a sarcastic way of saying that she finds their behavior manipulative and thus un-masculine. Similarly, she takes on the traditional role of "gentle lady" and "poor maid"—surprising considering that Helena had previously bucked gender roles by desiring to be the pursuer or wooer. Her new adherence to a division between manly and unmanly behaviors thus shows how rapidly the supernatural forest environment can shift the characters' identities. Just as Demetrius and Lysander have been bewitched into love and into the roles of pursuers, Helena has been metaphorically enchanted in this new, more passive position.

Act 4, scene 1 Quotes

❝ May all to Athens back again repair
And think no more of this night's accidents
But as the fierce vexation of a dream. (50)

Related Characters: Oberon (speaker), Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.68-70

Explanation and Analysis

Oberon at last feels pity for the way he has treated Titania and the other characters. He informs Puck to finish undoing his mischief and to allow the characters to depart the forest.

These lines verify the sharp division between the play's urban and forest settings. Whereas the forest is seen as the place of fantasy and magic, the city promises a return to normalcy. Oberon's use of the word "repair" stresses how the character's return to Athens will restore order to the broken relations and return to normal any behaviors made strange by the forest. His strict delineation between the two spaces casts the events that have transpired in the forest as whimsical and temporary—and to have little relevance to the rest of the characters' lives.

Oberon also addresses the importance of dreams in this play. Hoping the other characters will think of the events in the forest as only "the fierce vexation of a dream" means that they will consider them to have been a psychologically real experience but one that has no pragmatic effect on their lives. He thus aligns the forest environment with nighttime and dreams, whereas Athens is associated with daytime and "reality." These associations further emphasize that the romantic complications that have taken place in the forest are to be taken as illusory, for they should be seen as temporary and unreal.

And yet, as becomes clear just a few lines later, the wild, magical, "unreal" events of the forest have actually untangled the romantic mess of the four lovers in a way that the law of Theseus and Athens never could.

❝ I know you two are rival enemies:
How comes this gentle concord in the world,
That hatred is so far from jealousy,
To sleep by hate, and fear no enmity? (129)

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Lysander, Demetrius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.148-151

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus has stumbled upon Lysander and Demetrius sleeping by each other. He wonders how their proximity is possible considering how they had previously battled for Hermia's favor.

These lines return to the question of shifting identities, for Lysander and Demetrius' current behaviors are highly surprising in light of their previous ones. Theseus begins with the firm affirmation "I know" and then wonders how their deviation—"gentle concord"—from his knowledge of their rivalry would be possible. He wonders how the "jealousy" that they feel of each other would not inspire "hatred," for presumably if they did indeed hate each other they would fear "enmity" or some kind of negative retribution. His incredulous response shows that Theseus expects the two to have consistent identities and behaviors—and that he is surprised when Oberon's exploits have pacified them.

Importantly, this conclusion requires an external viewer—Theseus—to make sense of the way these two men have changed. Others within the forest are similarly

bewitched actors in Oberon's play and thus unable to rationally recognize how quickly they have shifted allegiances. But Theseus is able to stand apart from the action and thus offer this insight. Shakespeare thus makes him an analog for the audience—one who questions character development like any good interpreter.

And yet, at the same time, Theseus's confusion at the change in Lysander and Demetrius's characters again emphasizes how a viewpoint based entirely around "law" and "reason" is insufficient to comprehend or affect a world full of the irrational human feeling of love.

❝ I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom. (Bottom)

Related Characters: Nick Bottom (speaker), Peter Quince

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.215-226

Explanation and Analysis

After the other characters have left, Bottom finally wakes. He can recall the events of the previous night, but considers them to be a dream.

Although Bottom tries to explain the content of his dream, the majority of his description actually points out how inarticulable he finds his experience. That it is "past the wit of man" implies that it cannot be understood by human intelligence, and indeed he contends that a man would have to be "but an ass" and "but a patched fool" (both of which Bottom actually was during the night) if he believed he could describe the dream. The repetition of "methought" similarly undermines the certainty of what has transpired: Bottom presents each sentence as potential rather than certain. He then explores the limits of the human senses, contending that sight, sound, touch, taste, and even the emotional faculties of men are unable to make sense of what has occurred.

These lines presents Bottom as newly humbled by his experience in the forest which he sees as beyond human control. They further divide the illusory experiences of the night with rational human faculties. His comments are also quite ironic, for Shakespeare himself has described the contents of the dream by writing this very play. Bottom's wish that his dream serve itself as fodder for Peter Quince's play directs the audience's attention to this exact incongruity. Shakespeare thus subtly differentiate between two processes: comprehending an event and conveying it through art. Though man may not be able to make sense of Bottom's dream, that dream can be transformed into art that might be able to give them a kind of access to the experience of the dream.

Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

❝ More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact. (2)

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.208

Explanation and Analysis

The lovers have recounted their tale to Theseus and Hippolyte. While Hippolyte is sympathetic to the story, Theseus believes it to be entirely fantastical, with no basis in reality.

His explanation for their stories does not rely on magic or other forms of supernatural possibility. Instead, he contends that it is natural for the addled brains of lovers to experience reality in a warped way. He places in parallel first "lovers and madmen" and then "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet," contending that each sees the world in fantastical terms that have little to do with reality. Indeed, the similarity between insanity and romance is well-trod territory in Shakespeare's work—and the new reference to "the poet" is an enticing point. After all, Shakespeare is himself "the poet" of this work, just as Oberon and Puck were "the poets" of the performance in the woods. In both cases, it seems, this role gave them access to unique imaginative capacities.

Theseus, however, sees little value in that mindset. By

contrasting the verbs "apprehend" and "comprehends," he returns to the motif of visual perception, arguing that what lunatics see is distinctly different from the rational conclusions of "cool reason." He expresses a firm belief in logical rather than experiential knowledge. Yet this allegiance to rationality was unsuccessful at the play's onset in resolving the lovers' spat: Shakespeare thus shows the limitations of Theseus' perspective, implying that value remains in the poet, madman, and lover's practices, even if they are fundamentally irrational.

> You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
> The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
> May now perchance both quake and tremble here,
> When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
> Then know that I, as Snug the joiner, am
> A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam.
> For if I should as lion come in strife
> Into this place, 'twere pity on my life. (209)

Related Characters: Snug (speaker), Snug

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.232-240

Explanation and Analysis

The laborers perform their farcical version of Pyramus and Thisbe, much to the enjoyment of the other characters. Here, Snug enters playing the lion and reassures everyone that he isn't really a lion because he's worried he might scare the audience.

Snug's speech epitomizes how the actors comically misinterpret the way audiences experience theatre. The laborers assume that others are unable to differentiate between theatrical lions and real lions – between what is real and what is pretend. As a result, Snug assumes the "ladies" present will fear his representation of a lion simply because they would fear a real lion.

The scene is deeply comical—to the audiences both within and outside the play—because genuine theater is supposed to maintain illusions rather than shatter them. No audience, after all, would ever have legitimate concerns about a lion being real, but they pretend to think so to maintain the illusion of performance. Snug's speech thus becomes a farcical rift on theatrical conventions themselves. It is worth mentioning, however, that the play's characters did struggle in the forest to differentiate between reality and theater, between waking life and dream. Thus while Snug's speech may seem ridiculous, it also carries a poignant undertone that our borders of reality and illusion may not be quite so strict.

And Snug's ridiculous belief in theater's potential to overwhelm the audience also hints at theater's real magic, which is an ability to *feel* real even as the audience knows that it isn't, an ability to make the audience feel the dream even when it isn't dreaming.

> Not a mouse
> Shall disturb this hallow'd house:
> I am sent with broom before,
> To sweep the dust behind the door. (297)

Related Characters: Robin Goodfellow (Puck) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.404-407

Explanation and Analysis

As the play draws to a close, Puck enters alone and reflects on its denouement. He avows to leave behind a tranquil environment.

Earlier, Snug mistakenly worried that the audience of his play would mistake it for real. Here, Puck acts as if the play in fact *is* real and promises to sweep up after it andscrupulously clean the space of anything from the play that remains. Puck thus reiterates both how all that has occurred will soon fade into the past and be "unreal" to the audience that watched the play, but also that the play will leave remnants behind with the audience. In other words, he asserts both the plays unreality and its reality, and in so doing once again highlights the magic of theater, which is to find a common ground between reality and unreality in which actors, characters, and audience can co-exist.

These lines also subtly allude to the physical space of a theater. After Shakespeare's play has ended, all will indeed be silent, and custodians will presumably have to sweep it with a "broom." Puck thus verifies that he has been playing the metaphorical role of stage assistant to Oberon throughout their play within this play. And he cleverly describes the very space in which the audience sits as "this hallow'd house." Shakespeare thus likens the ephemeral nature of this play to the broader experience of attending theater—in which great actions are staged for a moment but then soon return to quiet absence.

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend,
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long,
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, goodnight unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends. (430)

Related Characters: Robin Goodfellow (Puck) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5.1.440-

Explanation and Analysis

Puck is left alone on the stage at the play's end to address the audience directly. He recommends that they think of what has transpired as a dream.

This final monologue verifies the parallels that have been made between the performance of theater and the experience of a dream. Puck likens the actions to "visions" and trivializes the action by describing it as a "weak and idle theme"—as something that would appear ephemerally, in one's dream. In that case, it would be easy to "mend" any offense because the consequences of that offense would be non-existent. Puck insists on his own honesty, and he challenges the audience to call him a "liar" if the play indeed does not fade away like a dream. These lines thus corroborate that the events are supposed to be seen as transitory, a perspective that would allow one to view from a distance, as art, all that has occurred.

By invoking his original name "Robin," Puck also marks the shift back from the forest dreamscape into reality. Recall that the fairy bestowed that name on him in the first supernatural scene in the play. Thus by taking back his own original identity, Puck signals to the audience that they will now resume their normal human endeavors beyond the confines of Shakespeare's work. In this way, Shakespeare presents the theater as itself a way to escape normal human concerns for a moment—to take on new identities in a metaphorical dreamscape or forest environment, before returning to reality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, 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 night's 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 inconstancy 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 loves 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 than 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.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of common laborers 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 laborer'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 laborers 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 laborer'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.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

In the forest outside Athens, a fairy meets with Robin Goodfellow. They discuss the conflict between Oberon, king of the fairies, and Titania, the queen of the fairies, about which of them should get to keep a beautiful Indian changeling boy as their attendant. The fairy suddenly asks if Robin is the mischievous fellow who goes by the nickname "sweet puck." Puck happily admits it, and brags a while about his mischief.

Act 2 introduces the fairies and the supernatural. The fight between Oberon and Titania indicates that the themes of love and battle between the sexes are also at play in the fairy world. The opening of the scene also establishes Puck as mischievous.

Puck quiets as Oberon and Titania enter. Oberon tells her, "ill met by moonlight, proud Titania" (2.1.62). They immediately begin to argue, and accuse one another of adultery.

Oberon objects to Titania's "pride" because she should be obedient to him. Adultery is the surest sign of love's inconstancy.

Titania tells Oberon that their fight has disordered nature, resulting in floods, fogs, dead livestock, and mixed-up seasons. Oberon responds that she could fix the problem by submitting to him and giving up the changeling. But Titania says she wouldn't give up the child for all of fairyland. The boy's mother was a worshipper of Titania's, and died giving birth to him. She raises him for her sake. She invites Oberon to go with her through the forest, but he refuses unless she gives him the changeling. She exits.

Titania's reasons for wanting to keep the changeling all seem perfectly reasonable, but they counter the "natural order" of women as subservient to man and so Oberon will not listen. The fairies magical power is obvious in the fact that their fights cause disorder in nature, though there's never any actual indication of this disorder in the play.

Once Titania is gone, Oberon vows to punish her for not obeying him. He calls to Puck, and reminds him of the time when Cupid aimed to hit the virgin queen of a land in the West, but his arrow missed its mark.

The virgin queen refers to Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare's queen and patron.

Oberon continues that he saw where that arrow landed: on a little flower that turned from white to "purple with love's wound" (2.1.167). This flower is called the love-in-idleness, and has magical properties. If the juice of the flower is placed on someone's sleeping eyelids, they will fall madly in love with the next living thing they see. Puck promises to circle the world in forty minutes and bring Oberon the flower. He exits.

Already in the play both Hermia and Helena have commented on how love affects the eyes, and love has been described as a kind of external force that overwhelms a person. So while the love juice is magical, it's also a symbol of how love is already viewed in the play.

Oberon, alone, muses on his plan: he'll wait until Titania is asleep and then place the juice on her eyes. When she wakes she'll fall in love with the first thing she sees, and he will not free her from the charm until she gives him the changeling.

Oberon plans to use love as a means of humiliation to humble his too proud wife. Oberon's plan also points out how love can cut across boundaries of beauty, status, and power.

Just then, Oberon hears voices. Since he's invisible, he decides to spy. Demetrius and Helena enter, walking through the woods. Demetrius tells Helena to stop following him since he does not love her, and promises to kill Lysander. When Demetrius again demands Helena leave him, Helena says "I am your spaniel . . . The more you beat me I will fawn on you" (2.1.203-204). After more back and forth, an exasperated Demetrius threatens to run from her and hide, leaving her "to the mercy of wild beasts" (2.2.235). Helena promises to chase him, though she says that women were meant to be wooed, not to woo.

The dark-side of an unequal love—love has so enslaved Helena that she describes herself as a dog to her master, who, not returning her love, treats her with disrespect. While the play seems to support subservience of women to men, this subservience is not simple dominance. Men must win subservience through wooing, and maintain it through shows of love, such as Theseus promises Hippolyta at the play's opening.

After they exit, Oberon promises that soon Demetrius will seek Helena's love. Once Puck returns with the love-in-idleness flower, Oberon tells him that "A sweet Athenian lady is in love with a disdainful youth" (2.1.268-269), and instructs Puck to find the man and put the love potion on his eyes when it is certain that the next thing he'll see is the lady. He adds that Puck can recognize the man from his "Athenian garments" (2.1.264).

Oberon has decided to use the love juice to "rewrite" the tragedy developing between Helena and Demetrius into a comedy in which everyone marries happily. But his "actors" in this play are real people. What's another word for a play in which the actors have no control over what happens? A dream.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

That night in the woods, Titania's fairy followers sing her to sleep in a beautiful glade. Oberon then sneaks past the guard protecting her, and drops the juice on her sleeping eyelids. He hopes that when she wakes the first living thing she sees will be utterly vile, and exits.

Even Titania is an actor in Oberon's "play," in which love is an overwhelming force not even the most powerful fairies can elude.

Lysander and Hermia enter. They've gotten lost, and decide to spend the night where they are. Lysander wants them to sleep next to each other, but Hermia insists that they sleep apart in order to preserve her modesty until they're married. Lysander promises to obey her wishes, praying to die should he cease to be loyal.

For all his love, Lysander still tries to sleep with Hermia before they marry. For a woman, love is a threat. It can inspire her to pre-marital sex, which would cause her social ruin.

Once Hermia and Lysander fall asleep, Puck enters, complaining that he's searched the forest and hasn't found the Athenian youth he's looking for. Then he spots Lysander, and takes the fact that the two are sleeping far apart as proof that he is the man who was spurning the Athenian lady. He drops the potion on Lysander's eyes, and rushes back to Oberon.

Puck's error unleashes the love juice on Lysander. The audience can anticipate that Shakespeare will manage to get Lysander to see Helena when he wakes, and that hilarity will ensue.

Demetrius runs into the glade, pursued by Helena. He demands she cease following. She begs him to stay. But he runs on, and she's too out of breath to follow. Helena despairs, and concludes she must be ugly… but just then notices Lysander on the ground.

Helena's desperate sadness in love continues.

Helena wakes Lysander, who immediately professes his love for her. He curses Demetrius for mistreating her, and regrets all "the tedious minutes" he spent with Hermia now that he loves Helena. Helena thinks Lysander is mocking her. She exits. Lysander tells Hermia's sleeping form to never come near him again, and rushes after Helena.

From high school to Shakespeare's plays, a lover's greatest fear is that the person they love will cease to love them in favor of someone else. It's happened already to Helena. Now it happens to Hermia, though she doesn't know it yet.

Hermia suddenly wakes from a nightmare in which a serpent was eating her heart while Lysander stood by, smiling and doing nothing. When she discovers Lysander is gone, she is terrified, and goes to find him.

Hermia dreams that a snake (a symbol of betrayal) steals her heart (symbol of love). Well, she's half right. Her love has been stolen, but by magic not betrayal.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

A while later, the laborers unknowingly enter the glade where Titania sleeps to rehearse their play. Before they start, Bottom states his concern that parts of their play are problematic. For instance, he thinks the ladies will be upset when Pyramus kills himself with his sword. Starveling says they should leave the killing out entirely, but Bottom proposes another solution: they could write a prologue in which they explain that no one really gets hurt, and further that Pyramus isn't really Pyramus, but Bottom. Quince agrees. Snout, meanwhile, thinks the ladies will also be afraid of the lion. Bottom solves that problem too: half of Snug's face should show through the lion's mask, to make it clear he isn't a real lion. Snug should also announce that he's Snug and not a real lion.

Through the laborers continuing fear that audience's will take their acting for reality, Shakespeare points out the true magic of theater. The audience watching Midsummer laughs at Bottom's belief that the Duke and his ladies won't be able to see through his acting. But the audience is laughing because Bottom is so dimwitted. In other words, the audience is laughing because it's judging Bottom as if he was a real person, not an actor.

The laborer's next theatrical dilemmas are how to make sure there's moonlight on the stage since Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight, and how to get a wall onstage, since Pyramus and Thisbe are separated by a wall. They agree they should have one actor carrying a lantern play moonlight and another covered with plaster play a wall.

The laborers continue to be incredibly simpleminded and literal about their play. They don't trust that an audience can just imagine that there's moonlight; they have to get someone to play moonlight.

Meanwhile, Puck, invisible, enters. Puck is amused by the laborers' constant mistakes, and decides to stay and watch, and be an "actor too, perhaps, if I see cause" (3.1.68).

Puck is about to stage a "play" of his own.


The laborers begin to rehearse, mangling their lines (substituting "odious" for "odorous") and missing their cues. The play calls for Pyramus to exit at one point, and Puck follows Bottom offstage. When Bottom returns, his head has been replaced by the head of an ass (donkey). Terrified, the other laborers run. Puck transforms himself into various beasts and chases them. Bottom, who thinks his friends are pretending in order to scare him, decides to show he isn't frightened by staying in the glade and singing.

Aided by magic, though, Puck's play really does blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Puck's play is like a dream, in which wild, supernatural things happen that the laborers can neither control nor comprehend.



Titania wakes at the sound of Bottom's voice. She begs Bottom to continue singing and tells him that she loves him. Bottom is dumbfounded, though he notes, "And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (3.1.129-130).

Even the self-important Bottom can tell that it makes no sense for Titania to love him. But his observation about love's irrationality can stand for the whole play.


Titania tells Bottom he must stay with her in the woods whether he wants to or not, because she loves him. She orders four fairies—Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed—to wait on him and bring him jewels, exotic fruits, and to lead him up to her sleeping bower.

Here is another of love's less than pretty side-effects: jealousy. As the more powerful member of this couple, Titania attempts to completely control Bottom.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

As Oberon wonders whether Titania has woken and with whom or what she's fallen in love, Puck enters and tells Oberon that Titania has fallen in love with a monster. He explains how he saw the laborers, transformed Bottom's head into the head of an ass, and then "Titania waked and straightway loved an ass" (3.2.35). Oberon is pleased.

Just as Egeus was willing to let his daughter die in order to assert his power over her, Oberon is willing for his wife to fall in love with an ass-headed mortal to assert his power.

But just as Oberon asks about Puck's success with the Athenian youth and Puck says he used the potion as Oberon asked, Demetrius and Hermia enter, fighting. Hermia suspects Demetrius has harmed Lysander because she doesn't believe he would abandon her. Demetrius insists he didn't hurt Lysander, but Hermia nonetheless tells Demetrius to never enter her presence again, and exits. Demetrius decides not to follow because she's so angry. Soon, he falls asleep.

The scene between Demetrius and Helena, is here reversed, with Hermia abusing Demetrius. Imbalances of love create imbalances of power.

Oberon realizes what has happened and scolds Puck: "What hast though done? Thou hast mistaken quite / and laid the love juice on some true-love's sight" (3.2.91). He orders Puck to search the forest for Helena, and use some illusion to bring her to Oberon, who will make Demetrius fall in love with her. Puck exits.

Oberon sees that the "play" he's trying to write in which everyone's happy isn't working out, and sends Puck to set it right. The lovers, though, don't know they're being manipulated, so to them this play is like a dream.

Oberon puts the love ointment on Demetrius' eyes as Puck returns with the warning that Helena is on her way and trailed by the lovelorn Lysander. Puck is excited to watch the two men woo Helena, saying, "Shall we their fond pageant see? Lord what fools these mortals be" (3.2.117).

As the love triangle reverses, Puck laughs at the lover's foolishness just as the lovers' will later laugh at the laborer's play. Puck is the audience of a comedy of his own making.

Helena enters with Lysander following and begging her to see that his vows of love are authentic. She doesn't believe him. Just then, Demetrius awakens, sees Helena, and falls in love. When he professes his love, she is furious. She thinks that now both men are mocking her.

Helena has been hurt by love before, which makes her aware that a declaration of love is not always authentic, and that even if it is authentic it isn't always reliable.

The two men now begin to fight and argue over Helena, and each tries to get the other to settle for Hermia.

Love can cause strife between men...

As Demetrius and Lysander argue, Hermia enters. She demands to know why Lysander abandoned her. Lysander tells her it was love that made him leave; his love for Helena. Hermia can't believe what Lysander is telling her. Meanwhile, Helena now thinks that Hermia has joined with Demetrius and Lysander to mock her. She calls Hermia an "ungrateful maid" (3.2.200) for turning on her now after their long friendship and for joining with men in mocking a fellow woman.

...and it can lead to strife between women as well. Love is celebrated as a great unifier, a creator of intimacy, but it can also rip friends apart.

Hermia can't understand why Helena would accuse her of such a thing. She demands Lysander tell her what's going on. But Lysander tells her to leave him alone and says he hates her. Hermia realizes Lysander is serious, and turns on Helena. She calls her "a thief of love" (3.2.297). Helena, who still thinks Hermia is making fun of her, responds by calling Hermia a shameless puppet, implying that Hermia is faking her emotion. But Hermia, who's shorter than Helena, thinks Helena is making fun of her height and claims "I am not yet so low But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes" (3.2.312-313).

And love can expose a person's greatest insecurities. Just as her failure in love earlier convinced Helena she was not pretty, now it begins to eat at Hermia, who fears she is too short.

Helena asks Lysander and Demetrius to protect her, which they gladly do, though she never ceases to think they're mocking her. The rivalry between the men, though, has grown so fierce that they leave the women alone and go into the woods to duel for Helena's love. Helena, frightened of Hermia, turns and runs. Hermia follows in hot pursuit.

And beyond emotional pain, love can cause physical pain. Through this fight between Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena, Midsummer shows nearly every aspect of the destructive side of love.

Oberon suspects Puck of having intentionally caused this mayhem. Puck swears he made an honest mistake, though he adds that he's glad he made it. Oberon instructs Puck to keep the men apart with illusions and tricks. Puck does just that as Oberon exits to go get the changeling from Titania.

And through it all the fairies are the audience for the mortals antics. And not just an audience, but writers too: Oberon sends out Puck to "rewrite" the mistakes that resulted in this play that the lovers don't know they've been caught in.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Through Puck's trickery and his ability to assume any of their voices, the four lovers all end up back where they started and fall asleep without seeing each other. Puck drops the love potion onto Lysander's eyes, saying that "when thou wak'st thou tak'st / True delight in the sight / of they former lover's eye" (3.3.39-41) and that all shall then be well.

Puck uses his magic to fulfill Oberon's plan to ensure a balanced love between the four lovers. When they wake up, what was a tragedy will be a comedy. And sos as the lovers sleeps their lives have been rewritten by the fairies one more time.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In her bower, Titania dotes on Bottom, placing flowers in his hair and kissing his mule-like ears as Bottom orders the other fairies to bring him bags of honey and scratch his head. When Titania asks what he'd like to eat, he asks for some dry oats or a handful of peas, and then they both fall asleep.

Bottom earlier worried that Snug would be mistaken for a real lion. Now Bottom has been put into a magical donkey "costume," and he's starting to act like a donkey. Titania, in love, doesn't notice.

Oberon and Puck enter. Oberon says that he now feels sorry for Titania, especially since she gave him the changeling the night before. He tells Puck to give Bottom back his original head, so that when he wakes he can return to Athens.

Once Oberon has reasserted his authority over Titania, true to his word, he lifts the spell.

Then Oberon drops the juice on Titania's eyelids. She wakes, and though confused how she could have loved an ass, reconciles with Oberon. Titania and Oberon dance together, and Oberon pronounces that on the next night they will dance at Theseus's castle in honor of Duke Theseus's wedding and the weddings of Lysander and Hermia and Demetrius and Helena.

Once humbled, Titania ceases to fight against her husband. Instead, she seems to accept his dominance as rightful. As for Oberon, he looks forward to the end of this comedy he's "written:" the lovers' marriage.

Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and many others enter, about to hunt. But they recognize the sleeping lovers and wake them. Theseus asks Lysander and Demetrius how such rivals came to be sleeping peacefully in the same glade. Lysander isn't sure, but explains his plan to elope with Hermia. Egeus wants Lysander and Hermia punished, but Demetrius says that although he followed Hermia into the woods because he loved her, he now, "by some power," loves Helena (4.1.161). Theseus overrules Egeus, decides that the four lovers will marry at his wedding, and then exits. The lovers comment on the strange dream they all shared the previous night, and follow the duke.

Oberon is the lord of nighttime, the lord of dreams. When dawn comes, Theseus, the upholder of law and reason, is lord. And in the light of day, the lover's passions of the previous night are only vaguely remembered. Yet somehow their irrational dreamlike experiences have exerted an unknown power over them that has solved happily what reason and law could only have solved unhappily.

Bottom wakes, calling out that he should be called when it is his cue to come back onstage. Suddenly he realizes he's not at rehearsal, and thinks that he must have fallen asleep and had an unfathomable and strange dream. He vows to have Quince write down the dream as a song, and to sing it to the Duke at the end of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Bottom, too, thinks his experience was a dream. And just as he saw the incompatibility of love and reason, he now recognizes that to look too deeply into a dream is foolishness. In a dream, as in love, there is nothing to understand.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

In Athens, the laborers meet to rehearse. But without Bottom, whom they consider the only man in Athens able to perform the role of Pyramus, they fear the play is ruined. With the news that there will be two other marriages along with the Duke's, the men become certain that their fortunes would have been made if they could have performed their play. As the men despair, Bottom enters. The men ask where he's been, but he responds only that it's time for them to perform their play.

The contrast of the laborer's hopes about their obviously terrible play offers a vivid contrast to the intense emotions of the forest. It is the difference between reality and dreams. The fact that their play fails to approach the power of dream emphasizes that Shakespeare's play, A Midsummer Night's Dream, succeeds.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

At the palace, Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the tale the lovers have told about their night in the wood. Theseus comments that lovers, like madmen and poets, have "seething" brains. All three see things that don't exist because their imagination is stronger and more disordered than that of a reasonable person. Hippolyta, though, suspects the lovers' story must be something more, since they all had the same dream.

Theseus, always literal, dismisses the lovers' "dream," and fairies in general, as mere imagination. Hippolyta's response indicates not that Theseus is wrong, but that imagination can't be dismissed so easily. And the outcome of the play, in which "dreams" solved what reason couldn't, supports Hippolyta.

The lovers enter, and Theseus asks them what entertainment they'd like to see that night. Philostrate brings forward a list of the possibilities. Theseus is interested by a "tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth" (5.1.60-61), and wants to know how a play can be so contradictory. Philostrate replies that the play is "tedious brief" because it's the shortest play he's every seen but still too long. It's "tragical mirth" because at the end of the play, when Pyramus kills himself, Philostrate cried, but only because he was laughing so hard.

Just as the lovers were unintentionally funny to the fairies, the laborers are unintentionally funny to their audience.

When Theseus learns that the players are simple manual laborers trying to do more than they are educated for, he decides to see it. He says that nothing "can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it" (5.1.88-89). Though Hippolyta objects that she doesn't enjoy seeing men made to look silly when trying only to serve, Theseus replies that he can tell when a man who cannot speak for nerves means to welcome him, and that he'll reward the laborers for the spirit behind their actions, not their acting. He adds that it will be fun to watch their mistakes.

The laborers have long feared that Theseus won't be able to tell that they're acting, that he'll think, for instance, that Snug is really a lion. Theseus here says that he can always see through acting to the reality beneath, and extends this idea of acting to the everyday activities of one person greeting another. Life, Theseus implies, is full of plays within plays.

Quince comes onstage and delivers a prologue. It is completely ludicrous. At one point, Quince claims that the actors don't even exist: "All for your delight we are not here" (5.1.114). Though as Theseus, Hippolyta, and the lovers remark, the prologue would have been normal if it had been correctly punctuated. Quince continues with the Prologue, introducing the story and also the characters: Pyramus, Thisbe, the Wall, the Moonshine, and the Lion.

Quince's prologue establishes the rhythm of this scene. The actors will present their play while the audience (Theseus, Hippolyta, and the lovers) makes fun of it good-naturedly. This is just the same as the situation in the forest, except there it was the lovers who were being laughed at by the fairies.

Snout introduces himself as the Wall and tells the audience that the lovers will speak though a hole in the wall that he represents with his fingers. Theseus and Demetrius comment that the Wall is the wittiest wall they've ever heard speak.

It's interesting that Hermia and Helena never speak in this scene. Could it be because they've married, and have therefore accepted their husband's dominance?

Bottom enters as Pyramus, and curses the Wall for dividing him from his love. Theseus comments that since the Wall can talk it should curse him back. Bottom, overhearing, turns to Theseus and says that the Wall actually shouldn't respond, because it doesn't have any lines here. This speech, Bottom explains, is Thisbe's cue to enter.

Bottom, who was so worried that his acting would be so good that the audience wouldn't be able to tell that he wasn't really Pyramus, here breaks from the play and addresses Theseus directly, as himself.

Flute enters as Thisbe and approaches the Wall. Through a hole in the Wall (which is actually Snout's separated fingers), the lovers speak about their love using numerous incorrect references to classical mythology. Finally, they decide to meet at Ninny's tomb (which should be Ninus's tomb) to elope. Hippolyta states, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" (5.1.222). Theseus responds, "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men" (5.1.211-212).

Hippolyta's right. The play is silly. But note how closely Pyramus and Thisbe resembles Lysander and Hermia's situation at the beginning of Midsummer. Are the laborers' mistakes any sillier than the lovers antics in the forest were? So the play is silly, but it also shows how silly lovers can be.

Snug comes onstage as the Lion, and explains that he is not really a lion at all and that the ladies shouldn't be frightened. Starveling enters and explains that the lantern he holds is moonshine, while he is the man in the moon. Theseus and the others make fun of the speeches.

The laborers continue to deconstruct their own play and point out that what their portraying isn't real.

Thisbe approaches Ninny's tomb but runs off and drops her mantle when the Lion roars. The Lion plays with the mantle, then departs. When Pyramus enters, he sees Thisbe's mantle on stage dirtied with blood that was on the lion's mouth. Thinking his love is dead, he gives a long speech, stabs himself, then proclaims himself dead in six different ways ("Now I am dead / Now I am fled / My soul is the sky...") before actually dying (5.1.290-293).

The misunderstanding and melodrama of Pyramus's death recalls the misunderstandings and melodrama of the lovers in the forest. The play makes the situation more ridiculous because it is so bad, which emphasizes just how good Midsummer must be, since it's similar situation came across as so funny and sublime.

Now Thisbe returns to the stage. She sees Pyramus lying dead. In despair she stabs herself, and dies. Theseus and the lovers continue to make fun of the play all the while. Finally, Bottom asks the audience if they would like to see an epilogue or a dance. Theseus says, "No epilogue, I pray you. For your play needs no excuse" (5.1.372-373). The laborers perform their dance, then exit.

Theseus's comment that a play needs "no excuse" echoes Bottom's that a dream needs no "expounding." An excuse destroys a play by revealing the unreality behind the acting. Expounding a dream destroys it by trying to make it rational.

Theseus says that it is almost "fairy time" (midnight), and therefore time to go to bed. All exit.

Once again, night is the domain of magic and fairies.

Puck enters, followed by Oberon, Titania and their fairy followers. They dance and sing to bless the three marriages and all the children the marriages will produce.

Oberon's "comedy" ends with everything resolved and the marriages blessed.

Everyone exits but Puck, who delivers an epilogue, in which he advises the audience that "If we shadows have offended" (5.1.440), they should just think of the play as if it was a dream.

Puck extends the idea of dreams and plays within plays out into the world. After all, hasn't the audience, like the lovers earlier, had a collective dream?

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