

A Midsummer Night's Dream

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).

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.