

A Midsummer Night's Dream : Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1 opens at the palace of Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Theseus is anxiously awaiting his marriage to Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, which is to be held in four days on the first night of the new moon. Theseus sends his director of entertainment at court, Philostrate, to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments" (12) and ensure that the duke's subjects are in

fleeing lovers.

Act 1, Scene 2

A carpenter named Quince and his fellow workmen, Snug the joiner, Bottom the weaver, Flute the bellows-mender, Snout the tinker, and Starveling the tailor gather in Quince's house. The group has heard that Theseus is to be wed and they want to produce a play in his honor. Quince, the director, announces that the play will be "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby" (11-2), and he announces who will play which part. Bottom, who has appointed himself "assistant director", is determined to produce the play his way. Although he already is to

do will quell her consuming desire. Oberon is unhappy that Demetrius does not return Helena's love and decides Demetrius should have a dose of the magical juice also. When Puck returns, Oberon explains the change in plans:
A sweet Athenian lady is in love
With a disdainful youth: anoint his eyes;
But do it when the next thing he espies
May be the lady: thou shalt know the man
By the Athenian garments he hath on.
Effect it with some care, that he may prove
More fond on her than she upon her love:
And look thou meet me ere the first cock crow. (260-7)

Act 2, Scene 2

In another part of the forest Titania's fairies sing a lullaby to protect their queen from potentially dangerous woodland creatures. They leave her sleeping on the soft leaves, and Oberon quietly enters to put the magic drops on Titania's eyelids. The two lovers, Hermia and Lysander, weary and lost in the dense wood, decide to rest until morning. But, before they lie down, Hermia instructs Lysander to keep his distance because "Such separation as may well be said/Becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid" (59-60). As they sleep Puck arrives and naturally assumes that, since they are Athenian and sleeping apart from one another, they must be Demetrius and Helena. Thus Puck mistakenly sprinkles the juice onto Lysander's eyelids. Demetrius comes running through the forest pursued by Helena who cannot keep up the chase. Demetrius leaves Helena behind and when Lysander awakes, Helena is the first person he sees. The juice works -- Lysander falls madly in love with Helena. She is offended by his advances and runs away but Lysander follows her, leaving the sleeping Hermia alone. When Hermia wakes, terrified by a nightmare, she sees Lysander is gone, and sets off to find him.

Act 3, Scene 1

Bottom and his associates arrive in the wood to begin rehearsing the play. Quince is ready to start at once but Bottom insists that the script needs changes. Puck happens upon the rehearsal and decides to play a trick on the tradesmen. He gives Bottom the head of an ass, which everyone can see but Bottom. The men are horrified by Bottom's transformation and they run off, screaming "O monstrous! O strange! we are haunted" (110). Bottom thinks that his friends are trying to frighten him and, to prove his courage, he sings a

song. Bottom's booming voice awakens Titania, who, under the spell of the

performances of Bottom and his colleagues very amusing. Hippolyta asserts, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" (214), but Theseus is more forgiving: "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men" (220-2). By the time the performance is over it is midnight, and the newlyweds, performers, and guests retire for the evening. When all is quiet, Puck and the fairies come out of the shadows to bless the marriages. For those of us who may be offended by being asked to believe in such nonsense as fairies, Puck leaves us with some final advice:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd 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, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends. (433-448)