

List of characters

The court

HIPPOLYTA Queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus
 THESEUS Duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta
 EGEUS father of Hermia
 PHILOSTRATE master of the revels to the Athenian court

The lovers

HERMIA in love with Lysander
 HELENA in love with Demetrius
 LYSANDER in love with Hermia
 DEMETRIUS Egeus's choice as a husband for Hermia

The Mechanicals

(workers who put on a play)

NICK BOTTOM a weaver who plays Pyramus
 PETER QUINCE a carpenter who speaks the Prologue
 FRANCIS FLUTE a bellows-mender who plays Thisbe
 TOM SNOOT a tinker who plays Wall
 ROBIN STARVELING a tailor who plays Moonshine
 SNUG a joiner who plays Lion

The fairies

PUCK (or Robin Goodfellow) Oberon's attendant
 OBERON King of the Fairies
 TITANIA Queen of the Fairies
 PEASEBLOSSOM
 COBWEB
 MOTH
 MUSTARDSEED
 A FAIRY in Titania's service

} Titania's fairy attendants



Hippolyta and Theseus have been at war and are now to marry to cement the new peace. Theseus regrets that time is moving slowly before he can marry Hippolyta, and orders preparations for their wedding.

Stagecraft

Theseus and Hippolyta

Shakespeare chooses to use two characters from a myth that was well known in his day. Theseus, Duke of Athens, fought a battle with the Amazons (a group of warrior women) and then married Hippolyta, their queen. The opening scene of the play is set in Athens, in Theseus's palace.

Imagine you are planning to direct a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Start your own Director's Journal and record your ideas as you go through the play. For this opening scene, consider the following questions:

- How do you want the stage to look as the curtain rises and members of the audience get their first glimpse of this world?
- How would you position your two actors? Think about their relationship, their past and the impact you want their first appearance to have on the audience.

1 Key words and images (in pairs)

Write down key words and images in lines 1–19 and look for patterns (such as those to do with the moon, or 'slow' versus 'quickly'). These patterns and the discussion between Theseus and Hippolyta give an idea of what the play is about.

- Make a list of what you consider to be the three most important words or phrases that Theseus uses, while your partner chooses Hippolyta's key words or phrases. Share your ideas and then write a few sentences describing what they reveal about the characters and their situation.
- With your partner, try to predict what might happen in the play. Consider how **imagery** and **symbolism** (see pp. 162–4) could foreshadow events.

Write about it

The moon, the night and dreams

Think about the title of the play and the focus on the moon, night and dreams in the opening speeches. Write two or three paragraphs on the emotions, associations and ideas that this imagery evokes for you.

nuptial hour wedding time

Draws on apace
will arrive quickly

step-dame stepmother

dowager widow with money
or property

revenue wealth

steep swallow, absorb

solemnities formal ceremonies

pert cheerful, lively

pale companion moon

I wooed thee I tried to win you

pomp celebration

triumph public festivities

revelling merry-making

 Egeus enters with his daughter Hermia and her two suitors, Lysander (whom she loves) and Demetrius (whom she dislikes). He appeals to Theseus to support his right to decide between them.

1 What kind of father? (in fours)

Is Egeus being totally unreasonable, or is he a responsible Athenian father who is justifiably taking control of Hermia's future and choices? Let one member of your group become Egeus, and the others form a 'court' of justice. Each member of the 'court' prepares one question to ask Egeus, who can then defend and explain himself.

► Hippolyta listens intently to Egeus's complaint and watches Hermia's response; she does not speak, but her face is expressive. What might she be thinking? Prepare her thoughts in note form. Then practise these ideas as a monologue. Try voicing them in character to the class.



renowned well known, distinguished

feigning untrue, deceitful

stolen ... fantasy stirred her imagination

gauds, conceits fancy trinkets

Knacks knick-knacks

nosegays posies of flowers

sweetmeats sweets, candies

prevailment pressure

filched stolen

Be it so if it turns out that

Language in the play

Language of love (in pairs)

Egeus uses very different language from Theseus and Hippolyta to present love. In pairs, pick out five words that show his attitudes and describe an alternative picture of love from that painted by Hippolyta and Theseus at the start of the scene.

*Enter EGEUS and his daughter HERMIA, LYSANDER
 and DEMETRIUS.*

EGEUS	Happy be Theseus, our renownèd Duke!	20
THESEUS	Thanks, good Egeus. What's the news with thee?	
EGEUS	Full of vexation come I, with complaint Against my child, my daughter Hermia. Stand forth, Demetrius! – My noble lord, This man hath my consent to marry her.	25
	Stand forth, Lysander! – And, my gracious Duke, This man hath bewitched the bosom of my child. Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes, And interchanged love-tokens with my child.	
	Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung With feigning voice verses of feigning love, And stolen the impression of her fantasy, With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits, Knacks, trifles, nose-gays, sweetmeats – messengers Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth;	30 35
	With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart, Turned her obedience, which is due to me, To stubborn harshness. And, my gracious Duke, Be it so she will not here, before your grace, Consent to marry with Demetrius,	40
	I beg the ancient privilege of Athens; As she is mine, I may dispose of her; Which shall be either to this gentleman Or to her death, according to our law Immediately provided in that case.	45



Hermia pleads to be allowed to choose Lysander for a husband. Theseus warns her to abide by Egeus's decision, otherwise she risks being sent to a convent or to her death.

Themes

Gender and power (in pairs)

The themes of conflict, power and gender are beginning to emerge.

- a** Who is the most powerful character at this point in the play? Where do our sympathies lie, and why?
- b** In what ways would life for men and women, and the nature of their relationship, have been different in 1594 (when this play was written) from today? With a partner, draw up a list of your ideas and consider if Shakespeare's contemporaries would have approved of Hermia's confidence in the defence of her choice. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

1 Sisterhood

Hermia stands up for herself as a lone female figure, surrounded by squabbling men. Yet she is not alone: Hippolyta, the other female on the stage, says nothing. Why? What is she thinking? Shakespeare has decided to leave her silent. As director, would you have some recognition pass between Hermia and Hippolyta? If so, suggest how it would be done.

Language in the play

Close analysis

HERMIA *I would my father looked but with my eyes.*
 THESEUS *Rather your eyes must with his judgement look.*

Write out these quotations at the centre of a blank sheet of paper, and then make brief notes on your analysis of:

- how language is being used
- how character is being developed
- which themes are being explored.

2 Male dominance (in fours)

Already there has been a 'forced' engagement. Go through the play so far, finding any images, **similes** and **metaphors** (see p. 164) that imply male dominance – for example, 'your father should be as a god' (line 47). Read the images about males, then those about females, and say which you find acceptable and which you find offensive – and why.

imprinted moulded, stamped

wanting not having

beseech implore, entreat

abjure reject

blood feelings

livery clothes

aye ever

cloister walkway in a nunnery

mewed confined

barren sister nun

distilled made into perfume

unwished yoke
unwanted constraint

sovereignty power, control



Theseus orders Hermia to make her decision before his wedding to Hippolyta. Lysander argues his case and points out that Demetrius loved Helena before Hermia, and that Helena still loves Demetrius.

1 Hermia's dilemma – what would you do? (in pairs)

Would you rather die or be imprisoned than marry someone you disliked? (Assume there is no possibility of divorce.) Give reasons for your reply. Make notes on your ideas and then write them up as a paragraph of structured argument. Share your paragraph with a partner.

Themes

Reality and illusion (in pairs)

When Hermia says 'I would my father looked but with my eyes' (line 56), she means that she wishes Egeus could 'see' Lysander as she sees him. The people watching 'see' the debates in this scene very differently.

One of you makes notes about where the sympathies of a Shakespearean audience might lie in this situation. The other makes notes on where a modern audience's sympathies may be. Compare your notes and discuss the different perspectives.

2 'Love' and 'dote' (in small groups)

There has been a good deal of talk about feelings. Talk with your group about which characters are sensitive to others' feelings, and which are not. Compile a list of all the words and phrases so far that describe or explore emotion.

Characters

Lysander

Lysander is beginning to emerge as an interesting character. Consider his response to Demetrius in lines 93–4:

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

How do these lines help us to understand Lysander's character? How would you advise an actor to play them? Write some briefing ideas for an actor who has been cast in the role of Lysander. (For more information on Lysander, see p. 160.)

sealing-day wedding day

betwixt between

Diana (Diana was goddess of the moon and of hunting, and she is closely associated with chastity)

austerity self-control, abstinence

crazèd title ridiculous claim

estate unto give to

as well-derived of as good a family and background

well-possessed rich

with vantage rather better

avouch guarantee, swear

to his head to his face

spotted stained unclean (morally)

THESEUS	Take time to pause, and by the next new moon, The sealing-day betwixt my love and me For everlasting bond of fellowship,	85
	Upon that day either prepare to die For disobedience to your father's will, Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would, Or on Diana's altar to protest For aye austerity and single life.	90
DEMETRIUS	Relent, sweet Hermia; and, Lysander, yield Thy crazèd title to my certain right.	
LYSANDER	You have her father's love, Demetrius; Let me have Hermia's – do you marry him.	
EGEUS	Scornful Lysander, true, he hath my love, And what is mine my love shall render him; And she is mine, and all my right of her I do estate unto Demetrius.	95
LYSANDER	I am, my lord, as well-derived as he, As well-possessed: my love is more than his, My fortunes every way as fairly ranked, If not with vantage, as Demetrius'; And, which is more than all these boasts can be, I am beloved of beauteous Hermia. Why should not I then prosecute my right?	100
	Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head, Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena, And won her soul; and she, sweet lady, dotes, Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry, Upon this spotted and inconstant man.	105 110



With a final warning to Hermia, Theseus takes Demetrius and Egeus away to talk to them. Left alone, Lysander and Hermia lament the problems of lovers.

Language in the play

Love, 'short as any dream' (whole class)

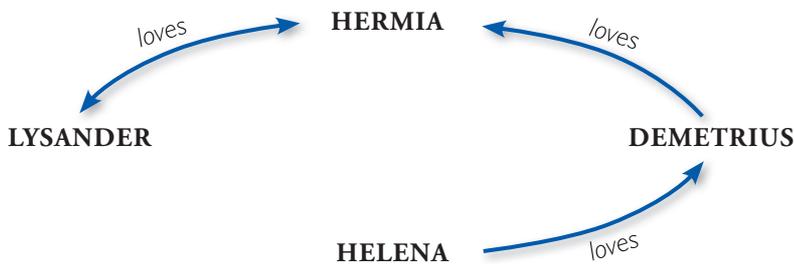
- a** In lines 141–9, Lysander paints love as a temporary thing: 'momentary' (momentary), 'Swift', 'short', 'Brief', surrounded by a hostile world. Talk about what he compares love to, and whether you think the comparisons are suitable.
- b** Lysander connects love with sinister imagery of 'collied night' and 'the jaws of darkness'. Why do you think this is? He is, after all, a man in love. Do you agree with him? Does love always have a shadowy, dark side? Reflect on your response to these questions. Make brief notes and then share your ideas in a class discussion.

Themes

'The course of true love never did run smooth' (in small groups)

Line 134 has become a commonplace saying. How true is it? Think about what it might suggest about the rest of the play. Make a list of movies, novels, poems and TV series that explore this theme. Then update your list with ideas from everyone in your group. See which group in the class can compile the longest list.

1 The dance of the lovers – who loves whom? (I)



▲ Discuss this diagram with a partner, then individually write a brief description of what it shows.

fancies desires
yields you up gives you up
extenuate change, reduce

what cheer how are you

Against in preparation for

Belike probably
Beteem grant
tempest of my eyes stormy tears
ought anything

blood class, family background
enthralled bound
misgraffèd mismatched

momentary momentary

collied darkened, like coal
spleen burst of temper