

***A Midsummer Night's Dream***  
**By William Shakespeare**

**CHARACTERS**

**THESEUS**, Duke of Athens  
**HIPPOLYTA**, Queen of the Amazons  
**EGEUS**, father of Hermia  
**HERMIA**, daughter of Egeus, in love with Lysander  
**LYSANDER**, in love with Hermia  
**DEMETRIUS**, suitor to Hermia, former lover of Helena

**NICK BOTTOM**, a weaver  
**OBERON**, King of the Fairies  
**TITANIA**, Queen of the Fairies  
**ROBIN GOODFELLOW (PUCK)**, a mischievous sprite with magical powers

**PLOT**

Theseus, the Duke of Athens, is to be married in four days to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, and he orders his Master of the Revels to prepare suitable entertainment for the nuptials. But other lovers of ancient Athens are not so happy as their ruler. Hermia, in love with Lysander, is loved also by Demetrius, who has her father's permission to marry her. When she refuses his suit, Demetrius takes his case to Theseus and demands that the law be invoked. Theseus upholds the father, which means that Hermia must marry Demetrius, be placed in a nunnery, or be put to death. Hermia swears that she would enter a convent before she would consent to become Demetrius' bride.

Lysander plots with Hermia to flee Athens, take her to the home of his aunt, and there marry her. They are to meet the following night in a wood outside the city. Hermia confides the plan to her good friend Helena. Demetrius had formerly been betrothed to Helena, and although he now loves Hermia he is still desperately loved by the scorned Helena. Desperate to reclaim Demetrius's love, Helena tells Demetrius about his rival's plan to elope with Hermia.

Unknown to any of the four young people, there are to be others in that same woods on the appointed night. A guild of Athenian laborers is to meet there to practice a play the members hope to present in honor of Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. The fairies also hold their midnight revels in the woods. Oberon, king of the fairies, desires for his page a little Indian prince, but Oberon's queen, Titania, has the boy. Loving him like a son, she refuses to give him up to her husband. In order to force Titania to do his bidding, Oberon orders his hobgoblin page, called Puck or Robin Goodfellow, to secure the juice of "love in idleness," a purple flower once hit by Cupid's dart. This juice, when placed in the eyes of anyone sleeping, causes that person to fall in love with the first creature seen on awakening. Oberon plans to drop some of the juice in Titania's eyes and then refuse to lift the charm until she gives him the boy.

While Puck is on his errand, Demetrius and Helena entered the woods. Making himself invisible, Oberon hears Helena plead her love for Demetrius and hears the young man scorn and berate her-- having both come to the woods to find the fleeing lovers, Lysander and Hermia. Oberon, pitying Helena, determines to aid her. When Puck returns with the juice, Oberon orders him to find the Athenian and place some of the juice in his eyes so that he will love the girl who dotes on him.

Puck goes to do this, while Oberon squeezes the juice of the flower into the eyes of Titania as she sleeps. But Puck, coming upon Lysander and Hermia as they sleep in the woods, mistakes Lysander's Athenian dress for that of Demetrius and pours the charmed juice into Lysander's eyes. Lysander is awakened by Helena, who had been abandoned deep in the woods by Demetrius. The charm works perfectly; Lysander falls in love with Helena. However, Helena, thinking that he is mocking her with his ardent protestations of love, begs him to stop his teasing and return to the sleeping Hermia. But Lysander, pursuing Helena, leaves Hermia alone in the forest. When she wakes, she fears that Lysander has been killed, for she believes that he would never have otherwise deserted her.

Titania, in the meantime, awakens to a strange sight. The laborers, practicing for their play, have paused not far from the sleeping fairy queen. Bottom, the comical but stupid weaver who is to play the leading role, becomes the butt of one of Puck's jokes. The prankster claps an ass's head over Bottom's own foolish pate near the spot where Titania lays sleeping. Thus, when she wakes, she looks first at Bottom, still wearing the head of an ass. She falls instantly in love with him and orders the fairies to tend his every want. This turn pleases Oberon mightily. When he learns of the mistake Puck has made in placing the juice in Lysander's eyes, however, he tries to right the wrong by placing love juice also in Demetrius' eyes, and he orders Puck to have Helena close by when Demetrius awakens. His act makes both women unhappy and forlorn. When Demetrius, who she knows hates her, also begins to woo her, Helena thinks that both men are ridiculing her. Meanwhile, Hermia, encountering Lysander, cannot understand why he tries to drive her away, all the time protesting that he loves only Helena.

Again, Oberon tries to set matters straight. He orders Puck to lead the two men in circles until weariness forces them to lie down and go to sleep. Then a potion to remove the charm and make the whole affair seem like a dream is to be placed in Lysander's eyes. Afterward he will again love Hermia, and all the young people will be united in proper pairs.

Titania, too, is to have the charm removed, for Oberon has taunted her about loving an ass until she has given up the prince to him. Puck obeys the orders and places the potion in Lysander's eyes.

The four lovers are awakened by Theseus, Hippolyta, and Hermia's father, who has gone into the woods to watch Theseus' hounds perform. Lysander again loves Hermia and Demetrius still loves Helena, for the love juice remains in his eyes. Hermia's father persists in his demand that his daughter marry Demetrius, but since that young man no longer wants her and all four are happy with their partners, Theseus gives the couples permission to marry on the day set for his own wedding to Hippolyta.

Titania also awakens and, like the others, wonders if she has been dreaming. Puck removes the ass's head from Bottom and the bewildered weaver makes his way back to Athens, reaching there just in time to save the play from ruin, for he is to play Pyramus, the hero. The Master of the Revels tries to dissuade Theseus from choosing the laborer's play for the wedding night. Theseus, however, is intrigued by a play that is announced as both tedious and brief as well as merry and tragic. So Bottom and his troupe present *Pyramus and Thisbe*, much to the merriment of all the guests, for it is incompetently written and performed. Theseus, however, charitably applauds the efforts of the laborers, valuing the intent more than the execution.

After the play, all the bridal couples retire to their suites, and Oberon and Titania bestow a fairy blessing over them, promising prosperity to them and all the children that will result from the marriages.

### MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

#### Romantic Love: Component One-- The Elevation and Idealization of Women

- manifestations: the idea that there is only one true love to whom one should devote oneself; the praise discourse in the romantic love tradition
- subverted through: 1) the interchangeability of the lovers (similar in rank and beauty; both would be an excellent match); 2) the way Lysander and Demetrius treat love as zero sum; when "in love" with one, they must now "hate" the other (whatever their former feelings-- even former feelings from mere moments earlier); 3) the hyperbolic language of devotion that does not change in character, even when targeted toward a different lover (if there can only be one "perfect" object of love, why is the way one speaks about different lovers interchangeable?)

#### Romantic Love: Component Two-- Love as defined by suffering

- manifestations: the more intensely one suffers (e.g., obsession, pain from separation, intensity of feeling) the more one loves; suffering through obstacles and set-backs as proof of one's love
- subverted through: 1) the silliness of Hermia/Lysander welcoming obstacles as validation of their feelings; 2) the willingness of Lysander and Demetrius to die over macho posturing about who loves Helena more; 3) the way the lovers eventually tire of suffering (because it's hard work) and just want to sleep and exit the wood

#### Romantic Love: Component Three-- Romantic lovers as operating on a higher plane of existence

- manifestations: life is experienced much more intensely by lovers than it is by ordinary people;

lovers speak and behave differently, losing track of the mundane and pragmatic

- subverted through: 1) a gap between elevated language and action and actual circumstances (e.g., Titania's words and actions with Bottom); 2) not thinking through consequences when motivated by love (e.g., Hermia/Lysander recklessly fleeing Athens without proper planning or forethought or Helena revealing their plan to Demetrius); 3) Lysander and Demetrius willing to die over who loves Helena more

#### Romantic Love: Conclusions

- romantic love is a bit silly and generally a poor guide to action; it is a kind of madness that we should probably resist
- romantic love is a feature of human existence that makes us prone to do silly things; it is a kind of madness to which we are all susceptible
- romantic love is something that can both make life wonderful, even as its irrationality complicates life in other ways; it is a kind of madness that elevates spiritual happiness-- but often at the expense of pragmatic concerns
- mature love is marked less by idealization than a commitment to a process; lovers bicker, display jealousy, and vie for dominance; lovers also reconcile fights, sustain one other, provide companionship, and perpetuate fertility (the re-alignment of the natural world back toward production with Titania/Oberon and literal children with Hippolyta/Theseus); mature love is not about perfection, but perseverance to discover its true rewards