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 a festive mood and prepared for the wedding. A commoner named Egeus arrives with his daughter, Hermia, and her two young suitors, Demetrius and Lysander. The furious Egeus lodges a formal complaint against Hermia because she is in love with Lysander and refuses to marry her father's choice, Demetrius. Egeus claims that Lysander has deviously bewitched his innocent child, singing mesmerizing lovesongs by moonlight under her open window, and lavishing her with fancy rings, baubles, and sweetmeats.

Egeus demands that, if Hermia does not agree to marry Demetrius, Theseus must grant him "the ancient privilege of Athens" (41), the barbaric license to kill Hermia for her disobedience or send her to a nunnery to forever live in seclusion. Although Theseus finds Lysander to be an upstanding young man, he advises Hermia to perform her duty as a respectful child and marry Demetrius as her father commands, for he feels obligated to uphold Athenian law. When she refuses, Theseus tells her to "take time to pause" (83) and think over her decision more carefully. He gives her until the day of his own wedding to make her final choice.

Demetrius interjects with a smug plea to Hermia and Lysander to yield to his "certain right" (92). Defiantly, Lysander insists that he is the better man, noting that Demetrius had wooed and then discarded Hermia's dear friend, Helena, who still "dotes in idolatry/Upon this spotted and inconstant man" (109-10). Theseus admits that he is simply too preoccupied with his own concerns to care about the subtleties of the feud between Lysander and Demetrius, and he leaves, taking with him Egeus and Demetrius to employ them "in some business/Against our nuptial" (124-5). Now alone, Lysander and Hermia decide to elope, agreeing to meet the following night in the woods near Athens. Meanwhile Helena appears, obsessed with thoughts of her beloved Demetrius. She begs Hermia to tell her with what charms she won Demetrius' heart. Hermia comforts Helena by revealing her plan to marry Lysander and leave Demetrius and Athens behind. Lysander and Hermia run off, and Helena, in a desperate attempt to regain Demetrius' attention, decides to expose Hermia's plan to Demetrius so that she can go with him to find the

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 play the role of Pyramus, Bottom thinks he should play the lion and Thisby as well. It is decided, however, that Flute should play Thisby, Snug should play the lion, Starveling should be Thisby's mother, and Snout Thisby's father. Quince tells the men they must all know their lines by the next night when they will rehearse in secret in the woods near Athens.

Act 2, Scene 1
The woods outside Athens are filled with fairies, presided over by their king and queen, Oberon and Titania. A mischievous servant to Oberon, Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow), and a fairy who serves the queen discuss the intense fight raging between the magical royal couple. The feud, so tempestuous that the fearful elves "Creep into acorn-cups" (31) for protection, is over a changeling, a "lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king" (22), whom Titania has made her personal attendant. Jealous Oberon desires to take the boy from Titania and make him "Knight of his train" (25), but Titania refuses to let Oberon make the changeling his page. Puck and the fairy cut short their conversation as they hear their masters approach from different sides of the forest. As soon as Oberon and Titania see each other they begin to quarrel. Oberon again asks for the boy but Titania insists that she can never part with the changeling due to an obligation to his dead mother, a mortal who was once in her service. Titania leaves and Oberon vows revenge, exclaiming, "I will torment thee for this injury" (147). He orders Puck to pick a flower called love-in-idleness and, while Titania is sleeping, Oberon will squeeze drops of its juice onto her eyelids. The juice will cause Titania to fall in love with the first thing she sees when she opens her eyes, be it a "lion, bear, or wolf, or bull/On meddling monkey, or on busy ape" (181-2). Puck rushes off to find the flower, assuring his master that he will "put a girdle round about the earth/In forty minutes" (174-5). While Oberon awaits Puck's return, he sees Demetrius, followed by Helena, begging to be taken back. Demetrius is cruel, telling Helena that he becomes sick when he looks at her, but nothing he can say or

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 rehersal 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 flower, falls instantly in love with him and calls on four of her fairies, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed to grant his every wish. Bottom introduces himself to the fairies as they lead him to Titania's dwelling.

Act 3, Scene 2

In another part of the forest, Puck reports to Oberon that Titania has fallen in love with an ass, and Oberon is delighted by the news. Puck also tells Oberon that he has successfully bewitched the mortal Athenian, but when Demetrius enters, arguing with Hermia, Oberon is baffled: "This is the woman; but not this the man" (42). Hermia demands to know what Demetrius has done with Lysander, and when Demetrius insists he knows nothing about what happened to Lysander, Hermia rages off into the wood. Exhausted, Demetrius goes to sleep on the forest floor. Oberon chides Puck for placing the wrong Athenian under the spell, and he commands him to find Helena, while he himself puts the magical juice on Demetrius' eyes. When Helena returns, Lysander is following behind, begging her to accept his love. Demetrius wakes and he too falls in love with Helena:

To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?
Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
That pure congealed white, high Taurus snow,
Fann'd with the eastern wind, turns to a crow
When thou hold'st up thy hand: O, let me kiss
This princess of pure white, this seal of bliss! (142-48)

Helena believes both men are mocking her and outraged she screams, "O spite! O hell! I see you are all bent/To set against me for your merriment" (145-6). Hermia enters, searching for Lysander, and is astounded by Lysander's behaviour toward Helena. Helena assumes Hermia must be involved in the malicious mockery, and a verbal battle ensues amongst the four. Lysander and Demetrius storm away to fight a duel and Oberon sends Puck to straighten out the situation once and for all. When with Lysander, Puck pretends to be Demetrius, and when with Demetrius, Puck pretends to be Lysander, sending them running throughout the forest in order to prevent the deadly confrontation. When Lysander falls asleep, Puck applies an antidote to the magical juice to Lysander's eyelids.

Act 4, Scene 1

Titania, her fairies, and Bottom arrive and Titania wants to place musk-roses around Bottom's hairy head and kiss his floppy ears, but all Bottom can think

about is oats and hay. When Bottom grows tired, Titania curls up in his arms and they take a nap together. Oberon and Puck enter and Oberon tells Puck that he will release Titania from the spell because she has consented to give him the changeling. Oberon orders Puck to change Bottom's head back to its original form and he awakens his queen, who is astonished by the dreams she has had: "My Oberon! what visions I have seen!/Methought I was enamour'd of an ass" (81-2). The reconciled royal fairies can now prepare to celebrate at Theseus' wedding the next day and Oberon vows that all the pairs of "faithful lovers" (97) will be wed.

The next morning, Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, and the duke's entourage are in the wood hunting. Theseus sees the four sleeping lovers and orders the huntsmen to wake them with their horns. Lysander immediately tells Theseus of his plan to elope with Hermia, and Egeus demands that Theseus execute Lysander for his treachery. But Demetrius quickly interjects that he no longer has any desire to wed Hermia, now that Helena is the sole "object and pleasure" (176) of his eyes. Theseus is overjoyed and graciously insists that the two reunited couples should marry on the same day that he marries Hippolyta. They all return to Athens, except for Bottom who wakes up in the forest, puzzled by the strange dream he has had. He decides to write a ballad about his dream which he will sing at the wedding. He calls it "Bottom's dream, because it hath no bottom" (223).

Act 4, Scene 2
Quince, Flute, Snout, and Starveling meet at Quince's house. They are troubled by the disappearance of Bottom, their prize leading man who has "simply the best wit of any handicraft man in Athens" (10). Snug arrives with news that the duke is coming and he brings with him two other couples who are to be married the same day. Snug believes that if they could only perform the play for all three couples they would become wealthy men. Just when the men are about to give up hope, Bottom enters, ready to take center stage.

Act 5, Scene 1
The hour of Theseus' wedding has come, and he discusses the planned festivities with the four lovers and his master of revels, Philostrate. Philostrate hands him a list of activities, on which is 'a tedious brief scene of young Pyramus/And his love Thisbe" (56-7). The master of revels pleads with the duke to cut the play from the agenda, but, when Theseus hears that a group of common workmen have laboured over the production, he decides to keep it on the roster, for "never anything can be amiss/When simpleness and duty tender it" (82-3). And so the play is performed, and the audience finds 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)