

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, ACT 1 SCENE 1

[Enter Theseus, Hippolyta, Philostrate, and Attendants]

Theseus

Beautiful Hippolyta, our wedding day fast approaches. In four days there will be a new moon, but this moon is taking forever to wane. It's like an aging stepmother or widow, growing old and spending her husband's fortune before his heir can inherit it.



Hippolyta

These next four days will quickly turn into nights, and the next four nights will pass quickly as we dream. Then the new crescent moon will appear in the sky above our wedding night like a silver bow.

Theseus

Philostrate, go tell the young people of Athens to get ready to celebrate. Make sure they're lively and joyful. They should save their melancholy for funerals—it's not fitting for our celebration.

[Exit Philostrate]

Hippolyta, I pursued you in war and won your love by defeating you with violence. But I will marry you in a different way: with a joyful, public celebration.

[Enter Egeus, his daughter Hermia, her lover Lysander, and Demetrius, the man Egeus wants Hermia to marry]

Egeus

Greetings, Theseus, our celebrated duke.

Theseus

Thanks, Egeus. What's going on with you?

Egeus

I'm very upset, and I've come here to seek your advice about my daughter Hermia. Come forward, Demetrius. Theseus, I have given my permission for this man, Demetrius, to marry my daughter. Come forward, Lysander. But this man, Lysander, has seduced her. You, you, Lysander, have written Hermia poems and exchanged romantic gifts with her. You've serenaded her at her window at night, singing fake songs about your fake love. You've infatuated her with bracelets made of your hair, rings, ornaments, trinkets, knickknacks, baubles, bouquets, and treats, all of which are very persuasive to my impressionable young daughter. You have stolen my daughter's heart with cunning, and you've changed her from an obedient daughter to a stubborn, harsh one. Theseus, if she doesn't consent to marry Demetrius here in front of you, I hope you will allow me to exercise the ancient right of Athens: since I am her father, I will rid myself of her, either by marrying her off to Demetrius or sending her to her death according to the law.

Theseus

What do you have to say for yourself, Hermia? Listen carefully, beautiful girl. You should treat your father like a god because you have inherited your beauty from him. Indeed, to him you're just a wax doll he has molded, and he has the power to leave you as you are or disfigure you. Demetrius would make a good husband.

Hermia

So would Lysander.

Theseus

Lysander may be a good man, but he does not have your father's permission, so Demetrius is the better choice.

Hermia

I wish my father could see things from my perspective.

Theseus

You should see things from his perspective instead.

Hermia

Please forgive me, your grace. I don't know what makes me bold enough to say something so desperate to a person so powerful that it may hurt my reputation for modesty, but I beg you to tell me — what's the worst that will happen to me if I refuse to marry Demetrius?

Theseus

You will either be put to death or give up the society of men forever by becoming a nun. Think carefully, Hermia. Understand that you are young and think about your passionate feelings. Think about whether or not you could handle living as a nun, forever shut up in a cloister, living a celibate life and singing weak songs to the cold, barren moon. Those who can control their passions and choose such a life are blessed three times over. But you'll live a happier earthly life if you choose to marry. If you marry Demetrius, you'll be like a rose who's picked and distilled into sweet perfume. If you choose to live as a nun, you'll be like an unpicked rose who withers away in celibacy.

Hermia

I would rather live and die as a nun than give up my virginity to Demetrius, whom my soul cannot love.

Theseus

Take some time to think about it. Give me your answer by the next new moon, which also happens to be my wedding day. On that day, you will either be put to death for disobeying your father, marry Demetrius, or choose to live as a poor, celibate nun forever.

Demetrius

Dear Hermia, please agree to marry me. And Lysander, give up your ridiculous claim on Hermia so that I can claim what I am entitled to.

Lysander

Since you have Egeus' love, Demetrius, why don't you just marry him and let me have Hermia?

Egeus

It's true that Demetrius has my love, Lysander, and therefore he is entitled to what is mine. Hermia is mine, and I give my right to her to Demetrius.

Lysander

Theseus, I am just as well born as Demetrius, and just as rich. I love Hermia more than he does, and I have just as much wealth as he does — if not more. And, most importantly, beautiful Hermia loves me. Why shouldn't I fight for her. Demetrius — I swear on my head — pursued Helena, Nedar's daughter. He won her heart and now she's madly in love with this fickle man.

Theseus

I'll admit, I did hear that, and I meant to speak to Demetrius about it. But I was so busy with my own affairs that I forgot to. Demetrius and Egeus, come with me; I have some advice I'd like to give you both in private. Hermia, try to want what your father wants for you, or else you will be subject to the law of Athens — which I will not change for you — and must either die or become a nun. Come, Hippolyta. How are you, my love? Run along, Demetrius and Egeus, I have something I need you to do before my wedding, and I'd like to discuss something that concerns you both.

Egeus

We will follow you because we have to and because we want to.

[Exit all but Lysander and Hermia]

Lysander

How are you, my dear? Why is your cheek so pale? How is it that the roses that were once there have faded so quickly?

Hermia

The roses in my cheeks have likely wilted because of a lack of rain, but I could easily give them water with the storm of tears from my eyes.

Lysander

Oh no. Everything I've ever read or heard about in tales or history shows that the road to true love is a bumpy one. Either it's a difference in social position —

Hermia

How terrible to love someone beneath you in society.

Lysander

Or the lovers are different ages —

Hermia

How awful to be too old to marry a young person.

Lysander

Or else other people choose our lovers for us —

Hermia

How horrible to have others choose whom we love.

Lysander

Or if friends and family approve of the choice, love will be thwarted by war, death, or illness, making love as momentary as a sound, as fleeting as a shadow, as short as a dream, as brief as

the lightning in the coal-black night, which bursts brightly in the heavens and before a man can even say, “Look!” is swallowed up by darkness again. That’s how fast love can be destroyed.

Hermia

If true love has always been thwarted in these ways, then it must be destiny. We should have patience then, because our problem is typical for lovers — as typical as thoughts, dreams, sighs, wishes, and tears.

Lysander

Good point. So listen, Hermia. I have a widowed aunt who has a lot of money and no child to pass it down to. Her house is far outside of Athens, and she thinks of me like a son. We can get married there, and we’ll be free of Athens’ harsh law. If you love me, then sneak out of your father’s house tomorrow night and meet me in the woods three miles outside of town — the same place I once met you and Helena to celebrate May day. I’ll wait for you there.

Hermia

Dear Lysander, I swear on Cupid’s strongest bow and his best, golden-headed arrow, on the innocence of Venus’ doves, on that which binds lovers together, and on the fire in which Queen Dido burned herself to death when she discovered that her lover Aeneas had left her — I swear on all the vows that men have ever broken (which far outnumber the vows that women have even spoken), I will meet you in the wood tomorrow.

Lysander

Keep your promise, my love. Look, here comes Helena.

[Enter Helena]

Hermia

Hello, beautiful Helena. Where are you headed?

Helena

Did you call me beautiful? Please don't say that. Demetrius loves your beauty. How lucky to be as beautiful as you! Your eyes are guiding stars, and your voice sounds more beautiful than a lark does to a shepherd in May. Sickness is contagious — I wish beauty and approval were too. I've only caught your words, Hermia. Before I go, I wish my ear would catch your voice, my eye would catch your eye, and my tongue would catch your tongue, so I could sound, look, and speak as you do. If I had the whole world, I'd give it all up if I could only appear as you do, so that I could have Demetrius' love. Teach me how to look like you, and teach me how to do whatever it is that you've done to make Demetrius fall in love with you.

Hermia

I frown at him, but he still loves me.

Helena

I wish your frowns could teach my smiles their skill!

Hermia

I curse at him, but he still loves me.

Helena

I wish my prayers were as good at stirring love in Demetrius as your curses!

Hermia

The more I hate him, the more he follows me around.

Helena

The more I love him, the more he hates me.

Hermia

It's not my fault he's so foolish, Helena.

Helena

It is your beauty's fault. I wish I had that fault!

Hermia

Don't worry — he won't see my face anymore. Lysander and I are planning to elope. Before I met Lysander, Athens seemed like paradise. But Lysander is full of such lovable qualities that he has transformed heavenly Athens into a hell.

Lysander

Helena, we'll tell you our plans. Tomorrow night, when Phoebe, the moon goddess, sees her face reflected in the water and turns dewdrops into pearls on the grass — that time of night that still hides lovers' escapes from others — we will sneak out of the gates of Athens..

Hermia

And in the woods where you and I used to lie down and gossip on primrose beds, Lysander and I are going to meet. And from there, we will turn away from Athens and find new friends elsewhere. Goodbye, dear friend. Pray for us, and good luck with Demetrius. Keep your promise, Lysander. We must not see each other until midnight tomorrow.

Lysander

I will, my Hermia.

[Exit Hermia]

Goodbye, Helena. I hope Demetrius will love you as much as you love him.

[Exit Lysander]

Helena

How come some people are so much happier than others? Throughout Athens, everyone agrees that I am just as beautiful as Hermia. But what does that matter? Demetrius doesn't think so. He refuses to admit what everyone else knows already. He's making a mistake, loving Hermia —

and I, too, am making a mistake, loving him. Love changes what's low and worthless into something beautiful and dignified. We love with our minds, not with our eyes, and that's why we depict Cupid as blind in paintings. And when we love, we don't have any judgment, just as Cupid, who has wings, but no sight, acts rashly and recklessly. We depict Cupid as a child because he makes such bad, unwise choices. Just as mischievous boys make false vows, so Cupid lies. Before Demetrius saw Hermia, he swore that he was mine. But as soon as Hermia caught his eye, he broke those vows. I'll go tell him about Hermia's plans to run away with Lysander. Then he'll go after them. If he's grateful, it will cause me pain because I will have helped him pursue Hermia. But from here on out, I will endure more pain if it means that I will see him when he leaves and again when he returns.

[Exit Helena]

Source: <https://myshakespeare.com/midsummer-nights-dream/act-1-scene-1-full-scene-modern-english>