

Act 1 Scene 1

The Royal Palace in Athens, Ancient Greece

Narrators come in. They remain on stage as audience throughout the performance

Narrator 1: Hey we're going on holiday to Crete this year – sun, sea, sand. I can't wait!

Narrator 2: And legends – that's where Theseus beat the Minotaur.

Narrator 1: Huh – who beat what?

Narrator 2: You know, the Minotaur – a monster, half man, half bull? Had a habit of eating children until Theseus killed it.

Narrator 1: Oh yeah, I think I've heard of that. So that was on Crete was it? This Theseus lived on Crete?

Narrator 2: No, he was just visiting. The children were sent every year from Athens because the Athenians were afraid of the Minotaur. Theseus killed the Minotaur, saved the children and soon after became the king of Athens.

Narrator 1: He was a bit of a hero then?

Narrator 2: Definitely. He fought other famous battles too – including one against an army of warrior women called Amazons. Theseus fell in love with their Queen. Her name was Hippolyta and she agreed to marry him. They appear in a Shakespeare play.

Narrator 1: Shakespeare? Hey, I was telling you about my holiday in the sun and now we're talking about Ancient Greek heroes and William Shakespeare?

Narrator 2: Yeah, it's a great story – A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Narrator 1: I've heard of that too. It's about fairies, right?

Narrator 2: There are fairies in it, that's true. Wait, let me find the play.

Narrator 2 gets a book and opens it

That's right, the story begins in Theseus' palace in Athens, a few days before his marriage to Hippolyta.

Theseus and Hippolyta come in talking and laughing together, attended by servants

Theseus: Hippolyta I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries,
But I will wed thee in another key –
With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.

Narrator 2: But the play's not really about them. It's about four of their wealthy subjects. It's a bit complicated but there's a young man called Demetrius who wants to marry a young woman called Hermia.

Narrator 1: What's complicated about that?

Narrator 2: Well Hermia doesn't want to marry Demetrius. She doesn't love him. She loves Lysander.

Narrator 1: Oh, I see. Does this Lysander love Hermia?

Narrator 2: Oh yes.

Narrator 1: Well that's okay then. They can marry each other and ignore Demetrius.

Narrator 2: No. Remember that this is ancient Greece – or Shakespeare's version of ancient Greece anyway.

Narrator 1: So?

Narrator 2: Well Hermia's father – he's called Egeus – he wants her to marry Demetrius.

Narrator 1: Why?

Narrator 2: No good reason really. But in those days a girl had to marry whoever her father chose.

Narrator 1: So what did they do?

Narrator 2: Well, Egeus took Hermia, and Lysander and Demetrius, to Theseus to sort it out.

Egeus comes in, pulling his daughter, Hermia with him. They are followed by Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus bows to Theseus

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.
Stand forth Lysander. And, my gracious Duke,
This hath bewitched the bosom of my child.

Turning to Lysander

With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart,
Turned her obedience which is due to me
To stubborn harshness.

Turning back to Theseus

And my gracious Duke,
Be it so she will not here before your grace
Consent to marry with Demetrius,

I beg the ancient privilege¹ 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.

Theseus: What say you Hermia? Be advised fair maid.
 To you your father should be as a god.
 Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

Hermia: So is Lysander.

Theseus: In himself he is,
 But in this kind², wanting your father's voice³,
 The other must be held the worthier.

Hermia: I would my father looked but with my eyes.

Theseus: Rather your eyes must with his judgement look.

Hermia: I do beseech your grace that I may know
 The worst that may befall me in this case
 If I refuse to wed Demetrius.

Theseus: Either to die the death or to abjure⁴
 For ever the society of men.
 To live a barren sister⁵ all your life;
 Chanting faint hymns at the cold fruitless moon.
 Take time to pause, and by the next new moon –
 The sealing⁶ day betwixt my love and me –
 Upon that day either prepare to die
 For disobedience to your father's will,
 Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would⁷,
 Or on Diana's⁸ altar to protest
 For aye⁹ austerity and single life.

Demetrius: Relent sweet Hermia, and Lysander, yield
 Thy crazed title to my certain right.

Lysander: You have her father's love, Demetrius,
 Let me have Hermia's. Do you marry him.

¹ traditional right ² case ³ without your father's approval ⁴ give up ⁵ nun ⁶ wedding
⁷ wishes ⁸ the followers of Diana, goddess of the moon, took vows of chastity ⁹ ever