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ACT ONE

READING NOTES:

Athens: The play is set in ancient Athens and in the woods outside of the city. Athens represents a civilized and ordered society in which everyone must remain in his or her place.

Woods: The place where Hermia and Lysander plan to meet before running away. This setting takes on greater significance as the play proceeds. The woods represent disorder, irrational passion, and a loss of reason.

The Royals – Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus: Theseus and Hippolyta are characters from Greek mythology. They are the King and soon-to-be Queen of Athens. Hippolyta was the Queen of the Amazons, whom Theseus defeated and so won her to be his new Queen.

Egeus: Hermia's father and a duke, a British nobleman holding the highest title outside of the royal family.

The Lovers – Hermia and Lysander; Helena and Demetrius: Shakespeare adopted their names from the classical world and their story from one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Because the setting is ancient Greece, the lovers serve and relate to the gods of Greek mythology.

The Tradesmen – Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snout, Starveling, Snug: They are also called Mechanicals or Workmen. Though they are Athenian tradesmen, they clearly behave and talk like English tradesmen in Shakespeare's day. Their names represent their occupations: **Quince**, a carpenter; **Bottom**, a weaver; **Flute**, a bellows-mender; **Snout**, a tinker; **Starveling**, a tailor; and **Snug**, a joiner. (See p. VIII of the Introduction in the text for an explanation of how each name derives from the occupation.)

Blank verse: Poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. It was the preferred form of verse by playwrights in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century and would ultimately become the most common and influential form of English poetry. It is Shakespeare's main form. Though it does not rhyme, it has a regular rhythm.

Iambic pentameter: From the Greek *ιαμβικός πεντάμετρος* (*iambikos pentametros*). Each line is ten syllables long, divided into five pairs of syllables called *feet*. Each *iambic* foot contains one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable.

Simile: The comparison of two unlike things with the use of *like*, *as*, or *than*.

Personification: A figure of speech in which a thing, an animal, or an abstract term (*truth*, *nature*) is given human qualities.

VOCABULARY:

1. Like to a step-dame or a **dowager** (1.1.5) _____

2. New bent in heaven, shall behold the night / Of our **solemnities**. (1.1.11) _____

3. Full of **vexation** come I, with complaint (1.1.22) _____
4. With **feigning** voice verses of **feigning** love (1.1.31) _____
5. Of strong **prevailment** in unhardened youth (1.1.35) _____
6. With cunning hast thou **filch'd** my daughter's heart (1.1.36) _____
7. One that compos'd your beauties; **yea**, and one / To whom you are but as form in wax (1.1.48)

8. But in this kind, **wanting** your father's voice (1.1.54) _____

9. I do **entreat** your grace to pardon me. (1.1.58) _____
10. Either to die the death, or to **abjure** / For ever the society of men (1.1.65) _____
11. My soul consents not to give **sovereignty**. (1.1.82) _____
12. For aye **austerity** and single life. (1.1.90) _____
13. Which by no means we may **extenuate** (1.1.120) _____
14. Against our nuptial, and **confer** with you (1.1.125) _____
15. It stands as an **edict** in destiny. (1.1.151) _____
16. Because in choice he is so oft **beguiled**. (1.1.239) _____
17. You may do it **extempore**; for it is nothing but roaring. (1.2.60) _____

QUOTES:

1. *Speaker 1:*

*Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
 Could ever hear by tale or history,
 The course of true love never did run smooth;
 But either it was different in blood—*

Speaker 2: O cross! too high to be enthrall'd to low.

Speaker 1: Or else misgraffed in respect of years—

Speaker 2: O spite! too old to be engag'd to young.

Speaker 1: Or else it stood upon the choice of friends—

Speaker 2: O hell, to choose love by another's eyes! – 1.1.132-140

Speaker 1: _____

To whom (Speaker 2): _____

Situation: _____

Meaning: _____

2. *And to that place the sharp Athenian law
 Cannot pursue us. If thou lov'st me, then
 Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night,
 And in the wood, a league without the town
 (Where I did meet thee once with Helena
 To do observance to a morn of May),
 There will I stay for thee. – 1.1.162-168*

Speaker: _____

To whom: _____

Situation: _____

3. *Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
 Love can transpose to form and dignity.
 Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
 And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind.
 Nor hath love's mind of any judgment taste;
 Wings, and no eyes, figure unheedy haste;
 And therefore is love said to be a child
 Because in choice he is so oft beguil'd.* – 1.1.232-239

Speaker: _____

Situation: _____

Meaning: _____

4. *Let me play the lion too. I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. ... but I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you and 'twere any nightingale.* – 1.2.61-62; 70-72

Speaker: _____

To whom: _____

Situation: _____

Meaning: _____

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. The play opens with what image? How do each of the three characters—Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus—make use of this image differently? _____

2. Why is Egeus angry with Hermia? _____

3. What is Lysander's argument against Demetrius? _____

4. When Theseus says to Hermia, "To you your father should be as a god ... and one / to whom you are but as a form in wax" (1.1.47-49), it reveals what about the social order of ancient Athens?

5. What three options does Theseus give to Hermia concerning her situation with Lysander?

6. What argument does Lysander make to Egeus when he compares himself to Demetrius?

7. Describe Bottom's character in Scene 2.

8. Several lines throughout the play feature examples of **personification** and **simile**. Identify two examples of each from Act 1. _____

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Quince: *Marry, our play is 'The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe'*

Bottom: *What is Pyramus? A lover or a tyrant?*

Quince: *A lover that kills himself, most gallant, for love.* – 1.2.10-11; 18-19

By having his tradesmen produce a play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare creates a **play within a play**, a **literary device** first used by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1587. The play within a play (or story within a story) usually has **symbolic**, **psychological**, or **figurative significance** for the characters in the outer play.

From what you understand of Act 1, why might Shakespeare have had his tradesmen stage a play about Pyramus and Thisbe?

2. What's in a title? *Everything*. What key elements do you find in the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

3. In 1.1.22, Egeus says, "Full of vexation come I." The **syntax** (word order) here suggests a pattern found in which other language? Why might Shakespeare have written some lines in this manner?