



Act Five

Theater at Court

Theseus frequently interrupts the performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe" with his comments. According to contemporary critic Stephen Orgel, the response of the monarch was always an important part of Elizabethan court theater. Orgel says in *The Illusion of Power* that "at these performances what the rest of the spectators watched was not a play but the queen at a play, and their response would have been not simply to the drama, but to the relationship between the drama and its primary audience, the royal spectator." Shortly before Christmas each year, the Master of the Revels would select plays from the repertoires of London theater companies to be presented at court during the holiday season. The actors received generous rewards for their services. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed before Queen Elizabeth and her successor, King James, both great supporters of theater.

Strolling vs. Professional Players

Several Elizabethan plays include satirical portraits of men who abandon their trades to take up acting. These untrained (and usually unskilled) actors were known as strolling players. Like the craftsmen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they sought a quick and easy profit from the theater. Most of them probably performed in small towns and cities.

Bottom and his friends never would have been allowed inside Queen Elizabeth's palace. Drama was usually performed at court by the professional acting companies of London, which were well-financed organizations operating under the patronage of noblemen. Each company was controlled by 9 to 12 master players who shared in the profits. Hired men performed roles for a weekly wage. Boy apprentices played female roles until their voices changed; many of them later became adult actors.

Pyramus and Thisbe

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is preserved in *The Metamorphoses*, a collection of ancient myths written in verse by the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C. to A.D. 18?). Set in Babylon, this tragic tale of two lovers who defy their parents and end up committing suicide is similar to other tales of star-crossed lovers, such as *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare read *The Metamorphoses* in an excellent Elizabethan English translation by Arthur Golding.



VOCABULARY

Entertaining Words

abridgment	a pastime
Bergomask	a country dance
device	a show
masque	a form of drama combined with music and dancing
revels	a general term for court entertainment
solemnity	celebration

BEFORE READING

You might want to distribute



- p. 32, *Glossary*, pp. 37–38
- *Strategic Reading 5*, p. 41
- *Literary Concepts 1–3*, pp. 44–46

ACT FIVE

AFTER READING

Discussion Starters

1. Do you find the end of the play satisfying? Why or why not?
2. Compare the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta with those between other lovers in the play. Which of the relationships do you think is the most stable? Support your opinion with evidence from the play.
3. What did you like best about the performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe”?

CONSIDER

- ✓ the staging of the play
- ✓ the quality of the performance itself
- ✓ the comments of Theseus and others in the audience

4. **Literary Concept: Comedy** What would you say is the main source of humor in Act Five? Explain.
5. **Making Connections** Do you think that the play has a message about love that can be applied to people today? Explain your view.

Writing Prompt

Bottom has just won the Athenian Laborers Guild award for best actor. Write an **acceptance speech** for him to deliver at the awards ceremony. Try to imitate his use of language in your speech.