



Act One

A Greek Hero and One Tough Amazon

Shakespeare emphasizes the statesmanlike qualities of Theseus. There is some basis for this portrayal in Greek mythology, which credits Theseus with forming the powerful city-state of Athens out of scattered communities. But he is better known for feats of daring, such as his slaying of the Minotaur, a half-man and half-bull shut up inside the Labyrinth.

After Theseus returned to Athens and became king, he managed to capture Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a mythical race of women warriors who lived without men. They maintained their population through sexual intercourse with outsiders, raising only the female offspring. According to some stories, they killed off their male babies. Accounts disagree about whether the Amazons attacked Athens before or after Hippolyta's abduction. Hippolyta either fought alongside Theseus or helped him arrange a truce with the Amazons. Later they were married, and Hippolyta gave birth to a son. Despite his mother's Amazonian origins, the boy survived into adulthood.

"Your Father Should Be as a God"

Theseus hardly exaggerates the power of Egeus to decide Hermia's fate. In ancient Greece, a father had absolute authority over his wife and children. Marriages were arranged for financial reasons or to create ties between families, not because the couple was in love. Although the Greeks wrote about romantic feelings, they rarely associated love with marriage.

This rigid view of marriage had eased considerably by the Renaissance. Arranged marriages were still common, especially in Catholic countries, but the bride and groom had to give their consent. In Elizabethan England, young people often chose their future spouses and then went to their parents for approval. In his comedies Shakespeare frequently portrays young lovers who end up happily married after overcoming a parent's opposition. *Romeo and Juliet*, on the other hand, shows the tragic consequences of parents who oppose their daughter's choice of a mate.

LITERARY CONCEPT

Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a speech in which a character speaks his or her private thoughts aloud. The character is usually alone onstage and appears to be unaware of the audience's presence. Some of Shakespeare's most famous dramatic poetry can be found in soliloquies, such as Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech. In the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena's soliloquy reveals her desperate plan to regain Demetrius's affection.



Through the Literature

DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING

BEFORE READING

You might want to distribute



p. 28, Glossary, pp. 37–38

• Strategic Reading 1, p. 39

• Literary Concepts 1–3, pp. 44–46

A Midsummer Night's Dream

ACT ONE

AFTER READING

Discussion Starters

1. Which of the characters do you find to be sympathetic or appealing? Explain.
2. Do you think that Hermia and Lysander are doing the right thing by running away? Explain the pros and cons of their decision.
3. How do you think Theseus feels about his decision to enforce the law against Hermia?

CONSIDER

- ✓ what he says about a father's authority
- ✓ what he knows about Demetrius
- ✓ his description of her punishment

4. **Literary Concept: Soliloquy** A soliloquy is a speech in which a character speaks his or her private thoughts aloud while alone. Reread Helena's soliloquy at the end of Scene 1. What does this soliloquy reveal about Helena and her experience in love?
5. **Literary Concept: Comedy** What is funny about Scene 2? Use examples from the scene to support your opinion.
6. **Making Connections** How might a modern family counselor attempt to resolve the conflict between Egeus and Hermia about her choice of mate?

Writing Prompt

Imagine that you are Lysander. Write a **letter** to your aunt explaining why you want to run away with Hermia to your aunt's house.