

Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1

At the palace of Duke Theseus of Athens, the famed Greek warrior anticipates marrying Hippolyta, former queen of the Amazons. In four days, the nuptials coincide with a new moon and amusements for Athenian youth arranged by Philostrate, master of revels. Theseus won Hippolyta in battle and plans to compensate her with a joyous ceremony. Hippolyta assures him that time will pass quickly before their wedding day.

Egeus and his short brunette daughter Hermia arrive at court with two rivals, Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus demands that Hermia marry Demetrius, the man of his choice. Hermia prefers Lysander. Egeus accuses Lysander of bewitching his daughter with original verse and love charms. The father believes that Lysander encourages Hermia's disobedience.

Duke Theseus likes the choice of Demetrius as a suitor. The Duke declares that, according to law, a daughter must obey her father. Hermia learns that the punishment for disobedience is either execution or a lonely life in a convent. Lysander declares that he is equal in status to his rival. Unlike Demetrius, who has courted the tall blonde Helena, Lysander is loyal to Hermia alone and not to her inheritance.

Duke Theseus intends to scold Demetrius for courting Helena and abandoning her. The Duke speaks privately to Demetrius and Egeus and warns Hermia to obey her father. The wrangling over Hermia depresses Hippolyta. Theseus promises to get back to discussing the entertainment at the forthcoming wedding.

In private, Lysander reminds Hermia that love is always filled with obstacles and unsolicited advice from friends. He proposes eluding Athenian law by eloping 16 miles from Athens to live with his wealthy aunt, a childless widow who adores him like a son. Outside of Athenian jurisdiction, Hermia can escape a sentence of death or life in a convent and can wed the man of her choice. She accepts Lysander's plan and promises to meet him on May Day morning two and a half miles from Athens.

Helena encounters the couple. She contrasts her looks to Hermia's darkness. Helena marvels at Hermia's ability to charm Demetrius, even

though Hermia dislikes him. Hermia and Lysander divulge their plot to elope the next night and to reunite in the woods at midnight. Helena decides to inform Demetrius, whom she hopes to win away from Hermia. When Demetrius follows the couple to the woods, Helena intends to pursue him and regain her former sweetheart.

Scene 2

Peter Quince, the carpenter, directs a band of volunteer actors whom Theseus has invited to perform a court play following the royal wedding. The players choose the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisby, two young lovers who die because of a misunderstanding. Quince assigns parts to his fellow Athenian laborers.

Nick Bottom, the weaver, accepts the starring role of Pyramus, but claims he is best at villains' parts. He wants to play all of the characters. Francis Flute, the bellows repairman, takes the role of the heroine Thisby. He is not happy to portray a female character because he wants to let his beard grow. He learns that he can wear a mask for the performance so he won't need to shave. Robin Starveling plays Thisby's mother. Tom Snout, the tin repairman, plays Pyramus's father; Quince plays Thisby's mother. Snug, the furniture maker, takes the role of the lion, which has no spoken lines.

To prove he should be the lion, Bottom claims he can roar and terrify ladies in the audience. The players worry that if the lion is too scary, it will frighten the women to death and the Duke might have the entire company hanged. Bottom agrees to moderate his roar. Quince flatters Bottom by insisting that Snug must keep the part of the lion because only Bottom can play the leading role of Pyramus. When the casting is complete, Quince sends the players off to learn their lines and tells them to meet for a rehearsal the following evening at the Duke's oak.



ACT II

Scene 1

The woods outside of Athens is the residence of Oberon, King of the Fairies, and of Titania, Queen of the Fairies and her company. Oberon's mischievous elf Puck, also called Robin Goodfellow, wants to keep Titania away from the woods because Oberon is approaching. Puck fears that the warring couple will meet and quarrel. Oberon is angry with Titania because she refuses to give him a sweet servant boy whom she received

from the king of India. Oberon wants to add the spoiled Indian child to the forest patrol. Titania's attendant fairy accuses Puck of being the hobgoblin who annoys villagers with tricks. Puck admits that he wanders the night to harass peasants.

Oberon and Titania meet and renew their bickering. Each accuses the other of disloyalty—Oberon with Phillida and Titania with Theseus. Titania claims that Oberon's persecution of her has caused rivers to flood, grain to rot in the fields, cattle to die, frost to kill roses, and people to suffer arthritis. Oberon blames Titania for perpetuating disorder by refusing to relinquish the Indian boy. Titania keeps the boy because his mother was a dear companion and priestess who died in childbirth. Titania intends to foster the child. Ignoring Oberon's demands, the queen departs to dance with the fairies.

To win the fight, Oberon sends Puck to find a pansy blossom called love-in-idleness, which Cupid turned purple and endowed with magic by unintentionally shooting it with his arrow. When the juice of this magical flower anoints sleepers' eyelids, it creates infatuation with the first creature they see upon awakening. Oberon plans to apply the juice to Titania's eyes to make her insanely passionate for a wild beast until she relents and gives him the Indian boy.

After Puck leaves to find the purple pansy blossom, Oberon sits scheming. Demetrius and Helena stumble into his bower, but Oberon is invisible to them. Like a spaniel, Helena actively pursues Demetrius, who threatens to hurt her if she doesn't stop stalking him. After the humans depart, Puck returns with the purple pansy. Out of pity for Helena, Oberon orders his elf to anoint the eyes of the Athenian man so that he will fall in love with Helena. Puck promises to fulfill Oberon's order and departs in search of a partially identified Athenian male.

Scene 2

On a flowery bank, Titania dances with the fairies, then sends them on errands. As she prepares for sleep, they sing her a soothing lullaby dispelling spiders and beetles. While she rests, one fairy stands guard. Oberon creeps up. He squeezes the potion onto her eyelids and casts a spell to make her arise when some vile creature comes near.

When Oberon leaves, Lysander and Hermia wander near Titania, who is invisible to them. Lysander suggests they stop for the night and find their way at daylight. Hermia agrees but won't endanger her reputation by letting him sleep beside her. After they fall asleep, Puck enters in search of an Athenian man to anoint with the magic juice. Seeing a likely candidate and Hermia lying separately, Puck applies the juice to Lysander's eyes.

After Puck exits, Helena pursues Demetrius to the bower. He sprints into the woods, leaving her to survive alone in the wild. Depressed and exhausted, Helena stops to rest and notices Lysander asleep on the ground. After she wakes him to determine whether he is alive, he instantly falls in love with her. When he claims to give up Hermia, Helena assumes he is teasing her. She runs away. Lysander leaves Hermia sleeping and chases Helena. Hermia awakens from a nightmare about a heart-eating snake and fears for Lysander's safety. She rushes into the woods.



ACT III

Scene 1

On a green lawn, Peter Quince and the players rehearse “Pyramus and Thisby.” Bottom fears that Pyramus’s suicide and the lion’s roars will terrify the women in the audience. The other players agree, wondering whether they should abandon the play. Bottom proposes the addition of a prologue, explaining that Pyramus is only an actor. Bottom also suggests that Snug, the actor playing the lion, must show half of his face and must identify himself to the audience. Quince mentions their need for moonlight and a wall. After consulting a calendar and almanac, the workmen discover that the moon will be shining on the night of the performance, so they can leave a window open to natural light. Bottom proposes that an actor covered in plaster play the role of the wall. Everyone agrees, and the rehearsal begins.

Puck eavesdrops on the performance, which amuses him for its amateurish acting. While Bottom awaits his cue, Puck covers his head with an ass’s head. When Bottom appears half man, half donkey, the terrified actors dash into the woods. Unaware of his transformation, Bottom has no idea what has frightened them. Puck compounds the confusion by appearing in a number of shapes and voices. As Bottom walks singing through the woods, Titania arises from sleep and claims Bottom as her love. She appoints Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed as Bottom’s servants.

Scene 2

Puck reports to Oberon the effects of the potion on eyelids. Oberon is pleased that Titania is enamored of Bottom and that Puck has also redirected the disdainful Athenian male toward Helena. Just after Puck assures Oberon that Demetrius loves Helena, Demetrius and Hermia enter. Puck realizes that he has bewitched the wrong Athenian. Because

Lysander has mysteriously disappeared, Hermia accuses Demetrius of murdering him and hiding the body. Demetrius insists that he didn't kill his rival, but Hermia refuses to believe him. Exhausted by the confusion, Demetrius sinks to the ground and falls asleep. Hermia continues searching for Lysander.

Oberon reprimands Puck for anointing the wrong Athenian with the magic pansy juice. Puck blames fate for the error. Oberon dispatches Puck to find Helena and anoints Demetrius's eyelids with the powerful juice. Lysander and Helena enter, still squabbling. To Puck's amusement, they awaken Demetrius, who falls in love with Helena at first sight. Hearing his declarations of love, Helena believes that Lysander and Demetrius are mocking her. When Hermia enters, Helena accuses her old friend of being part of the plot to ridicule Helena.

Hermia is shocked when Lysander declares he no longer cares for her. Helena wonders how Hermia, her closest childhood friend, could be so cruel. Helena accuses Hermia of being short and vicious; Demetrius defends Hermia from Helena's taunts. Helena runs away. Lysander and Demetrius hunt for a place to duel over possession of Helena.

Before dawn, Oberon forces Puck to fix the problem before the men attack each other. Oberon advises Puck to create a fog in which the lovers will get lost and collapse in exhaustion. When they awake in the morning, the night's events will seem like a dream and Demetrius will love Helena, his former girlfriend. Puck imitates Lysander and Demetrius's voices in the fog to befuddle them. The four rivals sink from weariness and sleep until daybreak. Oberon rushes to Titania to beg for the Indian boy.



ACT IV

Scene 1

Bottom enjoys Titania's bower, where she decks him with roses. Peaseblossom scratches his furry head, and Cobweb searches for a snack of honey. Bottom orders oats and hay for a meal. As he sleeps in Titania's arms, Oberon pities his wife for loving an ass. To soothe Oberon, Titania sends a fairy to transfer the servant boy to Oberon's quarters. Oberon squeezes an antidote from the chaste tree on her eyes to release her from the spell. Titania awakens, telling Oberon about her strange dream of being in love with an ass. Oberon has Puck remove the ass's head from Bottom. Before the lark announces dawn, the king and queen of fairies dance and awaken the Athenian couples. The royal fairies hurry off to bless Hippolyta and Theseus's union.

During a celebration of May Day, Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus walk through the woods at daybreak with hunters and baying hounds. When Theseus spies the sleeping lovers, Egeus identifies them, but wonders why rivals like Demetrius and Lysander sleep near each other. Theseus concludes that they exhausted themselves in early morning from observing the rite of May. Theseus declares it the day that Hermia must choose her future, death or a convent. When the dazed lovers arise, Demetrius explains why he followed Lysander and Hermia on their elopement. Demetrius rejects Hermia and claims Helena for his sweetheart.

Theseus sets the lovers' double wedding at the time of his and Hippolyta's nuptials. As the foursome returns to the palace with the Duke and Hippolyta, Bottom awakens and tries to understand what has happened to him. He proposes having Peter Quince write a ballad about the confusing events. The weaver names the poem "Bottom's Dream" because it has no bottom. He intends to sing the ballad after Thisby dies.

Scene 2

At Quince's house in Athens, he and Flute search for Bottom, who has not yet returned home. They fear that they can't perform "Pyramus and Thisby" without the male lead. The actors believe that Theseus will reward Bottom with a lifelong pension of six cents a day for his performance. As they lament the weaver's lost opportunity, Bottom suddenly returns. His friends want to hear his story, but Bottom tells them there isn't time because the Duke has finished the wedding dinner. Before the play, Bottom warns the actors to put on clean costumes, to secure masks and pumps, and to avoid onions and garlic so their breath will be sweet.



ACT V

Scene 1

After the three newly married couples leave the temple, Quince and his players arrive at the palace. Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the strange tale the lovers have told them. When the joyous couples enter, Theseus considers a list of proposed festivities for the evening. After ruling out two weighty poems and a satire that Philostrate proposes, the Duke chooses "Pyramus and Thisby." Theseus is intrigued by the paradoxes in the play, which is both merry and tragic, tedious and brief. Philostrate tries to dissuade Theseus from sitting through the silly scenario, but Theseus thinks the simple fare by dutiful Athenians deserves a hearing.

The players present “Pyramus and Thisby,” accompanied by the viewers’ critical asides. Hippolyta is disgusted by the poor quality of acting, but Theseus is touched by the loyalty of local workers. He argues that even the best actors create only a brief illusion. True enjoyment of drama requires the audience’s imagination. Following the performance, Bottom asks Theseus whether he’d like to hear an epilogue or watch an Italian peasant dance from Bergamo. Theseus opts for the dance, having lost patience with the players’ ineptness.

At midnight, the gathering breaks up. Puck sweeps the stage while commenting on drama. Oberon and Titania arrive with a procession of fairies. The company blesses the house and the newlyweds’ future children. Puck apologizes for the weakness of the performance and promises that the next production will be better.



List of Characters

THESEUS The proud Duke of Athens and a cousin of the mythic strongman Hercules, Theseus is a mature lover who eagerly anticipates marriage to Hippolyta, an Amazon queen he captured in battle. He listens to the noble Egeus's complaint about his disobedient daughter Hermia and renders judgment on a child's duties to a parent. Although sympathizing with Hermia, he upholds an anti-female law denying women control of their future. He counsels Hermia with his personal philosophy that marriage makes women blossom. Midway through the play, Duke Theseus displays a host's graciousness by leading Hippolyta on a May Day hunt and arranging a triple wedding ceremony. He prefers reason over fables and fairy tales, a fastidiousness suited to a military man. Nonetheless, he honors the lower-class mechanicals, even when their flowery compliments are nonsensical and their theatrical performance a sham.

HIPPOLYTA The former Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta is the captured bride of the warlike Theseus. Because of her circumstances at the court of Athens, she pities Hermia the choice between execution and confinement to a convent as punishment for refusing an arranged marriage to Demetrius. Refined and ladylike, Hippolyta soothes Theseus's ardor in the four days remaining before their wedding. Unlike her captor, she enjoys imaginative tales and commiserates with the lovers' difficult Midsummer Night in the woods. At the post-wedding performance of "Pyramus and Thisby," she exhibits a judgmental side of her character by mocking the ineptness of Robin Starveling, the clumsy actor who plays Moonshine. By the play's end, she admits to feeling sympathy for Pyramus, who grieves his love's violent death.

OBERON The king of the fairies, Oberon stands out from other characters for his selfishness and overbearing personality. He is given to eavesdropping and assumes the right to torment his wife, Queen Titania, and to steal her Indian boy servant. Oberon's plotting causes havoc on earth from wet wintry weather that bedevils humankind. After hastily dispatching his agent Puck to intervene in lovers' quarrels, Oberon gentles his spirit, pities his wife's humiliating infatuation with an ass-headed weaver, and orders a restoration of lovers to their original mates. In the resolution, Oberon honors marriage for siring children.

TITANIA The beloved mistress of the fairies, Queen Titania enjoys nightly frolics with her energetic sprites, who shield her from harm. During a separation from her quarrelsome husband Oberon, she accuses him of flirtation with Phillida and infatuation with Hippolyta. Titania's humanity shames Oberon for the misery he causes farmers and herders. In maternal fashion, Titania treasures the Indian boy servant, whose mother, Titania's priestess and confidante, died in childbirth. During Titania's bewitching, she generously bestows jewels and servants to sing Bottom to sleep. She nestles him while he rests and strokes his long ears, a motherly act devoid of lust. After the triple wedding, she displays her benevolence in blessing the palace.

PUCK The overconfident fairy trickster named Robin Goodfellow, Puck is a "knavish sprite" who arranges mischief at the command of King Oberon. Puck breaches standards of courtesy and exults in sadistic mayhem that befuddles humans and violates the order of the seasons. He studies the king's moods and wards off domestic fights between Oberon and Titania to keep his master jovial and amused. Puck's indifference to human suffering suggests a goblin run amuck. Although he is a court servant, he disdains the acting troupe as ignorant yokels and dismisses mortals as simpletons. At the end of his prank on the four lovers, he leaves Demetrius besotted with Helena. In contrast to Puck's original character, he sweeps the stage at play's end and apologizes to any playgoer who might be offended by the production.

EGEUS An old-fashioned Athenian father, Egeus insists on the right of the male parent to determine his daughter's future. Disgruntled at court, he attempts to sway Duke Theseus to execute Lysander for wooing Hermia. At play's end, Egeus is the only character who fails to grow in humanity and compassion. He finds the ruler less vengeful than himself and more sympathetic to Hermia's plight for rejecting Demetrius.

HERMIA A short, dark-skinned brunette with a fiery temper, Hermia exhibits the defiance of fatherly control that set Renaissance women against outdated laws and traditions of the Middle Ages. At one time, she shared with Helena a sisterhood that bound them in singing and embroidery. Hermia's maturity is evident in her willingness to vacate her father's house and to follow Lysander by abandoning her homeland and marrying outside of Athenian jurisdiction. On the way to Lysander's aunt's house, Hermia graciously leaves the field clear for Helena to win Demetrius. After Puck's interference bungles the pairing of Hermia with Lysander and Helena with Demetrius, Hermia takes on a militant pose and defends her love for a worthy man.

HELENA A willowy blonde noblewoman and daughter of Nedar, Helena envies the dark Mediterranean beauty of her old friend Hermia and abases herself with exaggerated claims of ugliness. In stalking Demetrius, an uncommitted male who betrayed her, Helena exhibits the faults of a love-stricken maiden willing to grovel to an abusive male. At a plot twist that has two men courting her, Helena is bewildered and pathetically vulnerable. Overwhelmed by a double pursuit, she fears smug ridicule from the two men rather than sincere courtship. Out of sorts with being the butt of humor, she belittles her old friend Hermia as dark, dwarfish, and scheming and claims to run faster.

DEMETRIUS A noble suitor of Hermia, Demetrius has a reputation for disloyalty. Unlike the loving Lysander, Demetrius wants to possess Hermia like a prize, even if he must commit violence against his rival. He gains the affections of Egeus, but not of his daughter, who prefers Lysander. To Helena, who gushes her infatuation for Demetrius, he is curt, dismissive, and menacing in his reference to rape in an isolated wood and in threatening Helena with peril. After Puck releases the lovers from a magic spell, Demetrius settles into the role of contented bridegroom and enjoys ridiculing the acting troupe.

LYSANDER A witty, self-assured young nobleman, Lysander claims himself the equal of his rival Demetrius in wealth and heritage and implies that he is the better man. Lysander cleverly courts Hermia with standard Elizabethan love gifts, a serenade, flowers, and original verse. At a face-off at Duke Theseus's court, Lysander cheerily invites Demetrius to wed Egeus rather than Hermia. It is Lysander's elopement plan that sets in motion the mix-up in the forest on Midsummer Night, the eve of the summer solstice on June 25. On the long walk to his aunt's house, he displays concern for Hermia's weariness and respects her modesty by sleeping apart from her. He is scrappy enough to challenge Demetrius to a duel.

PETER QUINCE A carpenter among the Athenian "mechanicals," Peter Quince is a laborer who proposes entertaining the Duke on his wedding night with an original production of the Greek myth "Pyramus and Thisby," which he writes and stages. Peter's methods are orderly and his directions clear. He is farsighted enough to realize that frightening the Duchess and her ladies could result in death sentences for the acting troupe. He also foresees a need for private rehearsals to conceal the group's art. He tactfully keeps the over-eager Nick Bottom in line and leads a search for his star after Bottom disappears. At the postnuptial performance, Peter demonstrates limited literal skills when he misreads the prologue.

NICK BOTTOM A self-important weaver among the Athenian “mechanicals,” Nick bears a clownish name suggesting Shakespeare’s focus on low comic relief from a potentially serious dramatic situation resulting in a girl’s execution. He intrudes on the direction of Peter Quince, who obeys Bottom’s orders. Playing Pyramus, Bottom belabors the troupe with opinions and anticipates earning a pension of sixpence a day for his performance. After Puck transforms him with an ass’s head, he finds himself wooed by the gorgeous queen of the fairies. Without realizing he is the victim of a prank, he sinks into luxury as though it were his right. Unruffled by his release from a magic spell, he performs his stage role with appropriate absurdity.

SNUG A joiner, or furniture maker, Snug aids five other “mechanicals” in performing “Pyramus and Thisby.” Less conceited than Nick Bottom, Snug admits to being slow at learning a role. To reassure the audience, he explains that he only pretends to be a lion.

TOM SNOOT The timorous tin repairer among the Athenian “mechanicals,” Tom Snout acts the part of the wall that separates the title lovers in “Pyramus and Thisby.” He makes himself ridiculous by holding his fingers in a vee to represent a chink in the wall.

ROBIN STARVELING An Athenian tailor, Robin Starveling joins the five “mechanicals” by playing Moonshine. Following the folk traditions of the Man in the Moon, he carries a lantern and thorn bush and leads a dog. His appearance draws heckling from the audience.

FRANCIS FLUTE An apprenticed Athenian adolescent, Flute studies bellows mending. Although he flaunts the beginnings of a manly beard, his name implies that his voice has not changed. He is squeamish about the acts of lovers and sees himself in the idealized role of a wandering knight. At Peter’s insistence, Flute grudgingly agrees to play the female role of Thisby by holding a mask over his face and speaking in a womanish voice.

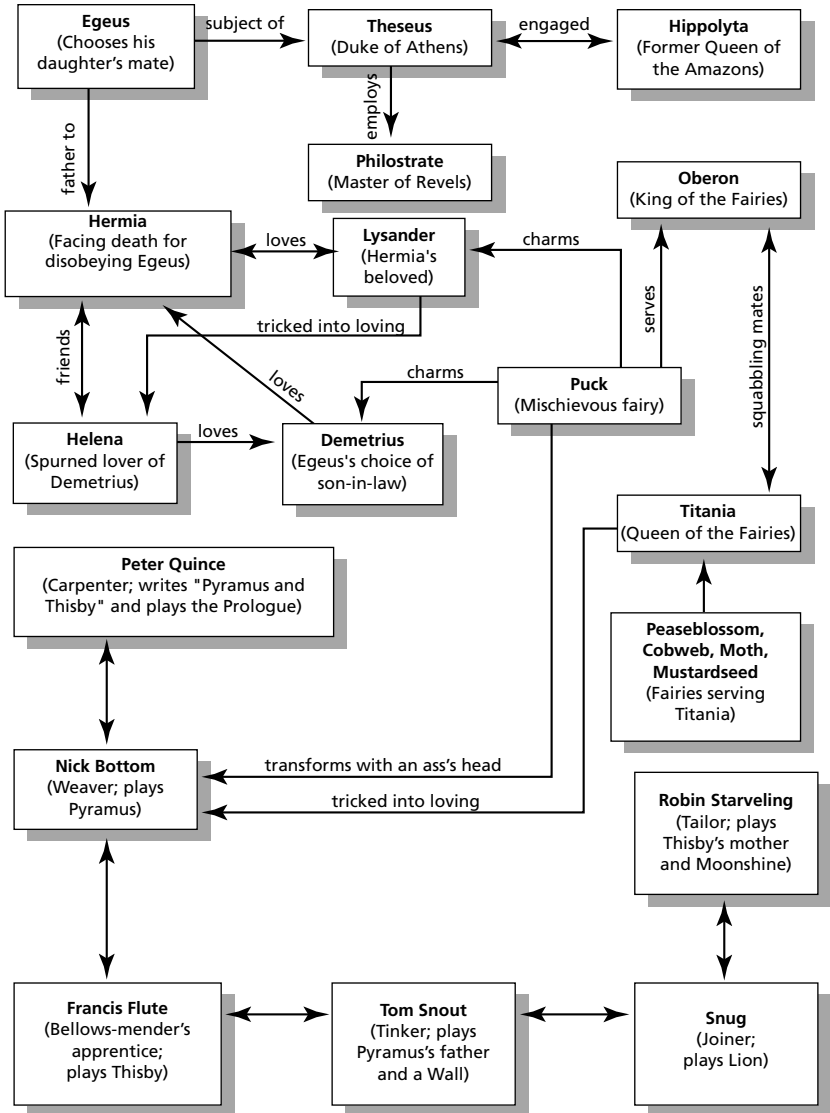
PHILOSTRATE The master of the revels at Duke Theseus’s court, Philostrate exhibits order and judgment against a backdrop of muddles. At the wedding of Hippolyta and Theseus, Philostrate assumes a pompous air in rejecting the five artisans’ amateurish play, which brought him to tears from laughing at the rehearsal. Like the uppity Puck, Philostrate snubs ignorant laborers.

PEASEBLOSSOM A gentle fairy, Peaseblossom is one of four attendants to Queen Titania during her infatuation with the ass-headed Nick Bottom. Peaseblossom obliges Bottom by scratching his itchy donkey’s head, a duty shared with the fairy **MUSTARDSEED**.

COBWEB A third attendant fairy, Cobweb locates honey for Bottom. The name cobweb causes Bottom to refer to the folk use of spider webs as a coagulant for bleeding.

MOTH The fourth fairy attendant on Bottom, Moth is a mere wisp in the romantic scenario between the long-eared lover and Queen Titania.

Character Map



Cycle of Love

