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LITERATURE READERS

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LESSON 1

A MOST LAMENTABLE COMEDY

[Here is one of the funniest parts of Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To celebrate the Duke's wedding, some workmen of Athens decide to prepare a play. They choose a play about the tragic deaths of two lovers called Pyramus and Thisbe. But they act so badly that instead of feeling sad at the tragedy, the Duke and his court laugh at the actors. Bottom, who thinks himself a fine actor, roars his part, strides about, waves his arms, and tears his hair. Flute(Thisbe) speaks in a squeaky, high-pitched voice. Most of the others have stage-fright and are stiff and wooden.]

Characters.—Quince, a carpenter; Snug, a joiner; Bottom, a weaver; Flute, a bellows-mender; Snout, a tinker; Starveling, a tailor.

SCENE 1.—THE CAST.

Scene.—A room in Quince's house.

Enter Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling.

Quin.—Is all our company here ?

Bot.—You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip.

Quin.—Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our interlude before the duke and the duchess, on his wedding-day at night.

Bot.—First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on, then read the names of the actors, and so grow to a point.

Quin.—Marry, our play is—The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby.

Bot.—A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll. Masters, spread yourselves.

Quin.—Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver.

Bot.—Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.

Quin.—You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.

Bot.—What is Pyramus ? a lover, or a tyrant ?

Quin.—A lover, that kills himself most gallant for love.

Bot.—That will ask some tears in the true performing of it. If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms, I will condole in some measure. To the rest; yet my chief humour is for a tyrant; I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates;
And Phibbus' car
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish Fates.

This was lofty! Now name the rest of the players. This is Ercles' vein, a tyrant's vein; a lover is more condoling.

Quin.—Francis Flute, the bellows-mender.

Flu.—Here, Peter Quince.

Quin.—Flute, you must take Thisby on you.

Flu.—What is Thisby ? A wandering knight?

Quin.—It is the lady that Pyramus must love.

Flu.—Nay, faith, let me not play a woman; I have a beard coming.

Quin.—That's all one: you shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

Bot.—An I may hide my face, let me play Thisby too.

I'll speak in a monstrous little voice, "Thisne, Thisne; Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear! thy Thisby dear, and lady dear !"

Quin.—No, no; you must play Pyramus; and Flute, you Thisby.

Bot.—Well, proceed.

Quin.—Robin Starveling, the tailor.

Star.—Here, Peter Quince.

Quin.—Robin Starveling, you must play Thisby's mother. Tom Snout, the tinker.

Snout.—Here, Peter Quince.



Drawn by John Rowell

"Nay, faith, let me not play a woman."

Quin.—You, Pyramus’s father : myself, Thisby’s father. Snug, the joiner; you, the lion’s part; and, I hope, here is a play fitted.

Snug.—Have you the lion’s part written ? Pray you, if it be, give it me, for I am slow of study.

Quin.—You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring.

Bot.—Let me play the lion too. I will roar, that I will do any man’s heart good to hear me; I will roar, that I will make the duke say, “ Let him roar again, let him roar again. ”

Quin.—An you should do it too terribly, you would fright the duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all.

All.—That would hang us, every mother’s son.

Bot.—I grant you, friends, if that you should fright the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more discretion but to hang us; but I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an ’twere any nightingale.

Quin.—You can play no part but Pyramus; for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man, as one shall see in a summer’s day; a most lovely gentleman-like man; therefore you must needs play Pyramus.

Bot.—Well, I will undertake it.

SCENE II.—THE REHEARSAL.

Scene—The Wood.

Enter Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling.

Bot.—Are we all met ?

Quin.—Pat. pat; and here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house; and we will do it in action as we will do it before the duke.

Snout.—Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion ?

Star.—I fear it, I promise you.

Bot.—Masters, you ought to consider with yourselves. To bring in, God shield us ! a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild-fowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to't.

Snout.—Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.

Bot.—Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck; and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect,—“Ladies, ”—or “Fair ladies,—I would wish you, ”—or “I would request you,”—or “ I would entreat you,—not to fear, not to tremble : my life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life; no, I am no such thing; I am a man as other men are; ” and there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner.

Quin.—Well, it shall be so. But there is two hard things; that is to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for, you know,

Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight.

Snout.—Doth the moon shine that night we play our play ?

Bot.—A calendar, a calendar! Look in the almanac; find out moonshine, find out moonshine.

Quin.—Yes, it doth shine that night.

Bet.—Why, then you may leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we play, open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.

Quin.—Aye; or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lanthorn, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine. Then, there is another thing: We must have a wall in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisby, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall.

Snout.—You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom ?

Bet.—Some man or other must present Wall: and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisby whisper.

Quin.—If that may be, then all is well.

(The rehearsal proceeds.)

SCENE III.—THE PERFORMANCE.

Scene.—Athens; the Palace of Theseus.

Enter Wall.

Wall.—In this same interlude it doth befall

That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;

And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
Through which the lovers, Pyramus and Thisby,
Did whisper often very secretly.
This loam, this rough-cast, and this stone doth show
That I am that same wall; the truth is so:
And this the cranny is, right and sinister,
Through which the fearful lovers are to whisper.

Enter Pyramus.

Pyr.—O grim-look'd night ! O night with hue so black !
O night, which ever art when day is not!
O night, O night ! alack, alack, alack,
I fear my Thisby's promise is forgot!
And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,
That stand'st between her father's ground and mine!
Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!
(Wall holds up his fingers.)
Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this !
But what see I? No Thisby do I see.
O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss !
Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me !

Enter Thisbe.

This.—O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,
For parting my fair Pyramus and me!
My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones,
Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.

Pyr.—I see a voice : now will I to the chink,

To spy an I can hear my Thisby's face. Thisby !

This.—My love! thou art my love, I think.

Pyr.— Think what thou wilt, I am thy lover's grace;

And, like Limander, am I trusty still.

This.—And I like Helen, till the Fates me kill.

Pyr.— Not Shafalus to Procrus was so true.

This.—As Shafalus to Procrus, I to you.

Pyr.— Oh, kiss me through the hole of this vile wall!

This.—I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all.

Pyr.—Wilt thou at Ninny's tomb meet me straightway?

This.—'Tide life, 'tide death, I come without delay.

*Wall, Pyramus, and Thisbe go out. Enter Lion and
Moonshine.*

Lion.—You, ladies, you, whose gentle hearts do fear

The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,

May now, perchance, both quake and tremble here,

When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.

Then know that I, one Snug the joiner, am

A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam;

For, if I should as lion come in strife

Into this place, 'twere pity on my life.

Moon.—This lanthorn doth the hornèd moon present—This
lanthorn doth the hornèd moon present—Myself the man i'
the moon do seem to be—All I have to say is to tell you that the
lanthorn is the moon; I, the man in the moon; this thorn-bush,
my thorn-bush; and this dog, my dog.

Enter Thisbe.



Drawn by John Rowell

"I see a voice."

This.—This is old Ninny's tomb. Where is my love ?

Lion (roaring).—Oh— (*Thisbe runs off; the Lion tears Thisbe's mantle, and exit.*)

Enter Pyramus.

Pyr.—Sweet Moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams;

I thank thee, Moon, for shining now so bright :

For, by thy gracious, golden, glittering gleams,

I trust to taste of truest Thisby's sight.

But stay, O spite!

But mark, poor knight,

What dreadful dole is here!

Eyes, do you see?

How can it be?

O dainty duck! O dear!