

Letty Mundt

Dr. Ridsen

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The Lamentable Comedy of Hermia and Lysander

Author's Note: In this multi-scene short story, I am attempting to further my understanding and critical thinking about the use of the "play within a play" motif of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and how it is perhaps meant to parallel and critique the main plot of the story. Thus, I have written a version of the Pyramus and Thisbe play performed in Act V, replacing Pyramus and Thisbe with Hermia and Lysander to explore the similarities between the two plotlines. The Pyramus and Thisbe play is seen as a jest by those attending it, Hermia and Lysander included, leaving the impression that Shakespeare is almost using the workers' performance to make fun of the play's characters and show them firsthand how ridiculous their own actions are. And when compared side-by-side, it is often ridiculous indeed how similar the two pairs' stories are, which I demonstrate by pulling frequent quotes both from Hermia and Lysander's canon plot, and the Pyramus and Thisbe play, and changing nearly nothing thematically or verbally in either storyline. I do, of course, take some creative and metaphoric liberties—substituting Demetrius for the lion Pyramus believes has killed Thisbe, swapping Ninus' Tomb for Demetrius' aunt's house and Egeus for the wall dividing the lovers, and most importantly, replacing the literal death of Pyramus and Thisbe with the figurative death of Hermia and Lysander's love. While Hermia and Lysander seem to live "happily ever after" in the main body of the play, their parallels to Pyramus and Thisbe in the laughingstock of a fifth act seem to suggest their love story may in fact "kill itself" in the future as Pyramus and Thisbe did—something I attempted to explore in the end of this piece with a new ending for Hermia and Lysander. Bringing the two stories together as one was certainly an interesting experiment for me to dabble in, and I hope it was a successful and entertaining one.

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The summer afternoon was dark and oddly cool against the Athenian palace walls—dread seemed to cast a pale blueness upon every face in the room despite the dizzying, sun-speckled outside heat. The room was set like a stage, each player with suspicion sharpening their gazes, tension coiling spring-like through every face.

From somewhere, a window's curtain was drawn, and it seemed to finally stir movement into the room's atmosphere. Hermia, who was standing very near to Lysander and trying desperately not to let her gaze twitch his way out of habit, was the first to clear her throat. However, her father Egeus was the first to speak.

“Perchance you wonder why I have brought you here—this man Lysander, and my beautiful daughter Hermia¹.” Egeus' brow furrowed as he spoke, stern voice shedding no hint of sympathy.

Lysander was quick to retort from Hermia's side—“For us you doth present a wall² between my love and I.”

Egeus did not even try to deny his role, just adjusted his thick robe and drilled a glare into Lysander so deep, Hermia swore it was piercing an arrow's hole between his eyes. “I am the same wall; the truth is so³. You, Lysander, hath bewitched the bosom of my child⁴, and because that is so, she will not consent to marry with Demetrius, who is the only one with *my* consent⁵.” His slow gaze snaked to Hermia, who felt a chill ricochet up her spine. “What say you, daughter?”

“O father, full often hast thou heard my moans for parting my fair Lysander and me⁶,” Hermia dared to remind him, even despite the fear worming in her gut. “Why cannot you look but with my eyes⁷ and see that my happiness is in Lysander's hands?”

“As you are my daughter, your fate is in my hands.” The reply was decisive, cold—stony as a wall indeed, and just as impenetrable. Egeus' eyes were flinty, ready to start fires. “Now, out

¹ Reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1. 126-129, the Prologue to the Pyramus and Thisbe play. All further footnotes will contain the line/s of the play referenced, paraphrased, or quoted within this short story, both from the Pyramus and Thisbe act and from Hermia and Lysander's canonical story.

² 5.1. 154

³ 5.1. 160

⁴ 1.1. 27

⁵ 1.1. 25

⁶ 5.1. 182-183

⁷ 1.1. 56

with you, scornful Lysander, for all my right of Hermia I do estate unto Demetrius⁸. She will stay here out of your reach until her wedding day.”

With that, Egeus had the scruff of Lysander’s collar in hand, and he began to tow him out the open door with unyielding strength before Lysander could do much more than let out a yelp of protest at the sudden aggression.

“Let him go,” Hermia cried, and ran forward with as much speed as her skirts could carry her. “You cannot keep me here as if I were merely a prisoner!”

But the men were already moving through the doorway, Egeus refusing to give way, Lysander calling to her from over his shoulder.

“O wicked wall,” he managed, before the door closed and drew up its barrier between them. “O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss⁹—you cannot keep my love from me. There must be a chink, Hermia!”

And with that he was gone, the bang of wood against stone in his place. Hermia blinked and found her eyes were blurring, red-hot and angry with tears she would not let fall. Her father dared stand between her and the one her heart called to, and now she could not even see Lysander at all, just the drab of the door, just the empty air. Even pressing her hands to the door, she found that it was locked from the outside, the kind of lock only a key could appease.

She gritted her teeth. Was there no way out of this? Would she be forced into Demetrius’ arms after all, with such a blockade between her and Lysander?

Except—*there must be a chink*. Of course.

Hermia quickly bent to the crack between the door and the wall, straining her vision to catch a glimpse of whom she hoped was beyond. “Lysander,” she whispered. “Lysander, are you still there?”

There was a moment of suspended silence, in which all the world might as well have held its breath, and then came a reply as gentle and hushed as rainfall: “I hear your voice. Through this chink I can spy, and I can see your face¹⁰, though not clearly.”

“My love,” Hermia replied, breathy and tremulous. “Is there not somewhere we can meet, some way I can kiss you besides through the hole of this vile wall¹¹?”

⁸ 1.1. 94-97

⁹ 5.1.176

¹⁰ 5.1. 186-187

¹¹ 5.1.194

“Hear me, Hermia: through your window you can climb, out from thy father’s house, and meet me in the wood. I have a widow aunt, a dowager, and just seven leagues from Athens. There, gentle Hermia, we may marry¹². Wilt thou at her house meet me straightway¹³?”

Hermia felt her heart flutter against her ribs, a trapped bird itching for freedom, for attendance to its aching wings. There was no doubt danger in what Lysander proposed, but yet she could not pretend as though her fingers were not inching toward her belongings to pack them away. Her spirits were already bounding toward the windowsill where green freedom could be tasted just two stories down.

She was decided, almost in an instant. “Tide life, ‘tide death, I come without delay¹⁴.”

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Guided only by moonlight and its dancing starry accompaniment, Hermia treaded carefully through the dark. Her journey had thus far been a series of shudders and bruises, unseen trees slapping harsh green lines across her cheeks, arms still sore from the exertion of climbing down the trellis beneath her bedroom window. Hours had meandered by, and yet the deeper Hermia crept between the woods, she still saw no sign of Lysander, nor his aunt’s estate, nor any hint or hope of safety.

Just black lines of trees and whatever shadows lay within them. Just the moon, hanging its single, solitary lantern over the forest’s thorns and dangers¹⁵.

A low sort of growl had her freezing where she stood, legs petrified and feet rooted to the earth. What now—a bear? A lion? Her father, already tracking her down?

Thankfully it seemed to be nothing of the sort, and as Hermia forced her useless legs to step as best she could, she began to see a dim light parting the trees ahead. It was soft, warm, domestic—a butter-bright halo no night could dim.

“The house,” Hermia breathed, and picked up her pace, a twisted concoction of fear and relief seizing her heart. “This is the house seven leagues from Athens. Where is my love¹⁶?”

The response returned to her was not the silence she expected, nor even Lysander calling to her—it was a different voice, and indignant one. And strangely enough, it was familiar.

It was, of all people, the one her father had betrothed her to.

¹² 1.1.156-168

¹³ 5.1. 196

¹⁴ 5.1. 197

¹⁵ 5.1. 231

¹⁶ 5.1. 246

“O¹⁷! Where is Lysander and fair Hermia?” the voice griped, and from the nearest line of trees emerged another boy Hermia’s age, hair ruffled from the wind, face pulled into a tight grimace. “The one I’ll slay; the other slayeth me. Helena toldst me they were stol’n unto this wood—so here am I, because I cannot find my Hermia¹⁸.”

“*Demetrius?*” Hermia exclaimed, and drew back as though the words had struck her.

Demetrius whirled on her, mouth open in a silent roar, hands up in defense. “There is my Hermia, just as I had hoped.”

“Not *your* Hermia on any count,” Hermia snapped, and drew her arms around her frame, hugging her shawl to her collar. “Hast thou come here on my father’s orders? Or art thou the reason my Lysander is not here waiting for me? Where is he?¹⁹”

“You spend your passion on a misprised mood—I am not your father’s pet lion, nor guilty of Lysander’s blood²⁰. I am here of my own merit, to ask for your return, and your hand.”

Hermia swallowed hard, but slowly, lowered her hands to her sides, though they remained balled into small white fists. “That will not do. I gave Lysander my word I would meet him here, and we would escape together ‘neath the moon.”

“Hermia,” Demetrius insisted, and strode forward, much too close, eyes glowing gold and near-hungry under the distant lantern light. “You must come, lest I force you.”

Even through the dark, Hermia saw the flash of his hand extend toward her before she felt it brushing her shoulder, seizing the neckline of her shawl as if moving in for a killing blow, or to grab her by the scruff of her neck and tow her home like a kitten.

With a short noise of protest, she ripped herself away, shawl slipping from her shoulders and into Demetrius’ grasp. “This is absurd,” she spat. “From here you will never see me no more. From thy hated presence part I so²¹.”

Demetrius said nothing, just held the mantle²², stared after her with ire in the set of his jaw.

And so, heart rattling in her chest and arms bare in the balmy night, Hermia darted away before he could grab for her again, legs wheeling toward the light, toward the house where she

¹⁷ 5.1.247

¹⁸ 2.1. 188-193

¹⁹ 3.2. 62-63

²⁰ 3.2. 74-75, also a reference to the lion in the play of 5.1.

²¹ 3.2. 80-81

²² To mirror the mantle dropped by Thisbe in 5.1. 248

hoped her love would await. Midnight spun around her in blue-black waves, and trees thrashed their limbs at her neck and feet, but she did not stop, and Demetrius did not follow.

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Lysander knew he was running late—quite literally, *running*, tearing through the bruise-toned rings of trees and their murmuring leaves, knowing that sending Hermia off alone into unfamiliar woods was almost asking for some sort of misfortune. He hadn't meant to get caught up in his duties; he had thought he would be there to meet his love beneath her window, but she had been long gone by the time he had slipped away unnoticed.

Still, now, even stumbling, he was at least grateful for the translucent light of the sky, enough brightness that he could move with haste, devote every step of his feet to plunging on toward Hermia.

“Sweet moon,” he murmured under his breath, “I thank thee for thy sunny beams, for shining bright enough that I might take sight of truest Hermia²³.”

But the further he trudged, the less he saw of Hermia's likeness; not one auburn ringlet crossed his line of sight. Perhaps it had been quite absurd indeed to believe Lysander might find one girl in leagues of trees.

“Hermia,” he called, in the loudest whisper he dared muster. “Hermia, are you here?”

It was then that Lysander caught a flash of something up ahead—a familiar blood-red shawl, illuminated by a distant light, and a figure in its shadow.

“Hermia,” Lysander repeated, louder this time, allowing hope to course through him and spread its warmth. He took off even quicker over the ground, sailing to the shadow ahead as if his feet had grown wings.

“Hermia!”

“Lysander?”

He screeched to a halt, eyes snapping open in dismay. This was not Hermia's voice, nor Hermia's person—just her mantle, in the hands of someone else.

“Fie, Demetrius! What dreadful dole is here²⁴?”

Demetrius looked no less pleased to see the other man's approach. He fisted his hands in the cloth of Hermia's cloak, fingers worrying at the seams. “I could ask the same of you.”

²³ 5.1. 253-255

²⁴ 5.1. 259

Lysander clenched his teeth. This was the last person he wanted to see—and why did he hold Hermia’s clothes? What had he done to her? What had he wanted with her? Or worse: what might Hermia have wanted with him?

“Hermia’s mantle good—is what, now, stained with your touch²⁵? You have seen her?”

Demetrius seemed inclined to tell him nothing. “So what if I have? She is mine in name, so her father hath said. I can do as I please with her.”

A dark rush of hatred rushed its way up Lysander’s throat, pooling in his mouth with the coppery tang of blood. Betrayal surged through him, strong as tides. “This vile man hath here deflowered my dear²⁶!”

Now something other than a sneer of apathy crossed Demetrius’ face: perplexity. “Wait, what? I never said—”

Lysander would hear none of it. “My Hermia is—no, no, was—the fairest dame that lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with cheer²⁷, and now, what is left of her? Just her mantle, in your arms, as perhaps she was, too?”

“No—Lysander—”

“Say no more,” Lysander snapped, hard enough that Demetrius even flinched back. “Demetrius: how fit a name to perish on my sword²⁸! And now no longer can I be content with Hermia; I can only repent the tedious minutes I with her have spent. Perhaps she is merely a raven, and there is some other dove for me.²⁹”

“Some other dove...? I know of no other worthy lady except perchance Helena,” Demetrius said, and the words sounded like the cautious question of a man who had not the faintest clue what was occurring before him.

“Helena!” Lysander inhaled sharply. “Transparent Helena³⁰, but of course! If Hermia hath decided to pledge her love and body to you and not I, then away with her! I can hate her and love Helena³¹!”

“Art thou mad?” Demetrius deadpanned.

²⁵ 5.1. 264

²⁶ 5.1. 274

²⁷ 5.1. 275-276

²⁸ 2.2. 112

²⁹ 2.2. 117-120

³⁰ 2.2. 110

³¹ 3.1. 281

Lysander felt anything but mad, not now with his new resolve. “It is a simple thing to kill what was once love in my heart. Thus dies it, thus, thus, thus; now it is dead, its soul in the sky. Moon, fly me to Helena. And Hermia, your place in my heart, now die, die, die, die, die³², as you have died in my eyes.”

With that, Lysander turned tail and fled toward the light streaming from his aunt’s distant cottage. Hands still shaking with his passion, he sent a long howl to the clouds that were tip-toeing around the moon. The moon did not answer, merely shied away, disappearing behind a cold wall of gray.

There were only the stars to guide any love or lovers now³³, far away and faded, bowing to the Earth as if in mourning.

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Hermia was out of breath by the time she reached the front steps of the lit-up house. It was run-down with the air of a tomb, stone walls nearly crumbling with her touch. Gnarled and knotted lichens fluttered on and around the structure like flies on a dead carcass, and the door was stern and solemn as though no one should dare pass through it.

Still, tomb or no tomb, Lysander should have been here.

Taking an enormous breath in through her nose, Hermia raised one fist to meekly knock, but was distracted by a voice coming from her right, around the cottage’s side.

Not again, she lamented inwardly, shivering without the protection of her cloak. *I cannot take one more mystery voice!* “Help me, Lysander, help me—alack, where are you³⁴?”

Yet the voice kept flowing to her all the same, as though taunting her. “I had no judgment when to her I swore³⁵. It is Helena who deserves my vows.”

Helena? Her best friend’s name from another’s lips was peculiar so deep in these woods, where no others should have treaded.

Unless—no, it could not have been. Not with such words.

Heart beginning to thump, Hermia peeked around the building’s corner, squinting through the obscure blackness. “Dark night that from the eye its function takes, makes the ear quicker. Lysander, by mine ear, not mine eye, have I found thy sound³⁶?”

³² 5.1. 282-288

³³ 5.1. 296

³⁴ 2.2. 152-159

³⁵ 3.2. 134

As if her voice had triggered something in the nearby figure, it emerged from the shadow of the cottage, eyes dark and brimming with loathing. Hermia's heart sank when she realized it was in fact her Lysander—with no embrace for her, nor words of love, as though she had done something to forsake him.

“Away with you³⁷,” Lysander hissed, before Hermia could even take a breath.

“What change is this, my love³⁸?” Hermia demanded, a nervous horror beginning to settle within her, heart now sloshing about in her stomach. “Speak, speak. Your eyes were green as leeks³⁹, now they are dull as death. What has happened?”

“Out, loathed medicine! O hated potion!⁴⁰ To me you are dead!” Lysander was only inches away, but his voice could have traveled miles, and it dug into Hermia until she swore she could feel pain from it.

“Hated? Dead?” Hermia could not comprehend; the word swiveled in her head until it dizzied her. She stepped back, heel digging into the mud. “What news, my love? Am not I Hermia? Are not you Lysander⁴¹?”

“Being Hermia is the problem,” said Lysander by way of answering, and the look on his face was something completely foreign. Hermia could hardly imagine him gazing upon her like this, like she had carved his heart straight out of his chest, but she could not deny how his eyes were glazed with ire. “I love Helena, not Hermia, and will do till my death⁴².”

“Helena,” Hermia repeated, and felt air leave her lungs entirely; it was scooped right into the woods. This must have been a nightmare, yet pinching her skin between her forefingers did not whisk this horror away. “I cannot—but—what, has she come by this night and stolen my love's heart from him⁴³? Or is this in jest? Lysander, please—”

“Get gone, you dwarf! You bead, you acorn⁴⁴!”

In one last seize of panic, Hermia sank to Demetrius' level and grabbed for Lysander with palms outstretched, but she was shaken off, hard enough that she was pushed back into the

³⁶ 3.2. 177-182

³⁷ 3.2.257

³⁸ 3.2. 262

³⁹ 5.1. 315

⁴⁰ 2.2. 264

⁴¹ 3.2.272

⁴² 3.2. 167

⁴³ 3.2.283

⁴⁴ 3.2.327-329

dirt. A lance of pain seared up her leg as she landed atop it, wholly unprepared for the sudden assault. This was not her Lysander, yet here he was, a fire in his touch and a voice that burned. Had this blaze been here all along, and Hermia had just not seen it? Had Lysander merely feigned his love from the start, and lured her out here to ridicule her and send her back to her father in shambles?

Lost in her own dazed thoughts, Hermia had failed to realize Lysander had disappeared behind the door of his aunt's house, a harsh wooden clank emphasizing the motion and rattling Hermia's teeth.

She sat for a moment in dumbfounded shock, the gears of her mind churning and whirring but unable to comprehend anything other than the death of Lysander's affection. Nothing about it lined up, no explanation by Lysander given, nothing but words as weaponry and a girl lying in the dirt.

What was there to do now? Go home? Demetrius would be waiting there, at her father's side, some solemn smirk adorning each of their faces.

Hermia had no choice, she supposed. It was return to Demetrius, return to Egeus' watch, or waste away in this unfamiliar territory, clinging onto a love long gone.

She looked up, into the light of the cottage. Shadows moved among it, low voices too muffled to be heard.

"Farewell, then, Lysander," Hermia whispered, and stumbled to her feet, swaying under the weight of her injured leg. "If your heart hath shut me out, then so will mine unto you. Thus this love ends. Adieu, adieu, adieu⁴⁵."

The soft halo of light followed her path back into Athens, but even as it guided her steps, Hermia's head remained bowed in darkness.

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Even hours later—Hermia's dark curls dangled down over her bowed forehead, submission in every line of her complexion. In the light of the morning, she was sheet-pale, almost a ghastly translucent. Any whisper of a lovers' midnight had long since withered; Hermia stood beside Demetrius, who had her by the arm. This time, she did not move away, but let him return her lost mantle to her shoulder, its weight simultaneously comforting and demeaning.

Egeus eyed them both with a beady gaze, once more without sympathy or endearment.

⁴⁵ 5.1. 324-326

“Hermia,” he said, “Hermia, my Hermia, despite your unfortunate excursion, I assure you, the wall that hath parted us is now down⁴⁶.”

Hermia said nothing, but frowned. It certainly did not seem that way. Her father’s eyes were boring into her as though he planned on devouring her whole, and his words were stern as ever.

“At the very least, I ask of you no excuse for your actions,” Egeus pressed on. “For since my daughter is home, and is to be married to this here Demetrius, there need none to be blamed⁴⁷. The love between you and Lysander appears to be dead at last. Nothing else matters.”

Still, Hermia said nothing. In fact, she felt nothing, not anything like her previous spikes of anger at her father’s words—just numbness, as though she were floating high above this ground, already beyond her own life, somewhere amongst fairies and constellations. Her sleepless night felt light-years away already, buried beneath her grief.

Lysander? Where was he now? What would he become? Would Hermia ever lay eyes on him again?

Perhaps her father was right. Perhaps it no longer mattered at all, and this was simply the way her story must end.

“Come now,” said Egeus, and it felt very much like the closing of a velvety curtain. “Lovers, to bed,⁴⁸ and this silly tragedy behind you.”

⁴⁶ 5.1. 330

⁴⁷ 5.1. 333-335

⁴⁸ 5.1. 340