

Political Authority in "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

How much does political context influence an author's work? Obviously, several works throughout time were written as a response to political authority. Some works challenged the authority while others seemed to support and pay tribute to those holding political power. Obviously, no one may completely disconnect themselves from their culture, political or otherwise, so it is not surprising that elements of Elizabethan politics have influenced many of Shakespeare's works; nonetheless, through his dramas, specifically "A Midsummer Night's Dream," did he actually intend to legitimize the political authority in London at that time? Leonard Tennenhouse suggests that he has. Although Tennenhouse offers plausible arguments to support his case, the play also works to undercut political authority in several ways.

*significantly
undermined*

Tennenhouse claims that all plays during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I were subject to the political culture in London. For example, he states that many old genres fell out of favor when James I ascended the throne, and new ones were created as the writers sought to establish their proximity to the new political authority (110). When Shakespeare wrote his dramas, he argues, he did so with an understanding that he must represent and legitimize the government in control to avoid being closed-down. One element of Shakespeare's drama, then, sought to

authorize political authority (111).

One of the reasons for this, Tennenhouse explains, was the fact that political authorities, including those in the Church, understood the kind of power a playwright wielded over the masses. Of course the Church disliked anything that competed with their Sunday sermons, but there was also a fear of the mob-like and unruly activity often taking place in the theaters. The authorities sought to control such a form of influence (115). Those in power had nothing against the theater itself but feared the kind of power it could unleash. Consequently, "Only those performances could be authorized in London which in turn authorized the governing powers of that city" (116).

With this in mind, Tennenhouse argues that, as a romantic comedy, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (seeks) produces political order out of sexual chaos. In this case, the authority must be called forth[?] solve "a problem with authority itself, authority grown archaic" (111). Hermia must face a patriarchal society ^{in which} where she is completely subject to her father's will. To resolve this, Tennenhouse explains, either the law must become independent of the father, or the father must change his desires. The former is the case. Through the interference of Oberon--a character Tennenhouse sees as representing "the traditional alternative to patriarchal law" (111)--harmony is produced between the lovers; this accord then prompts the Duke to overrule the father. The political context changes, then, and a new one emerges in which the law (Theseus) is independent of the

patriarchal tradition (112). In this way, Tennenhouse argues, Shakespeare authorizes political authority.

While Tennenhouse correctly observes that the play begins in sexual chaos that is resolved by the political authorities, Oberon and Theseus, the means employed to bring about this resolution undermines any legitimacy of both authorities. Oberon's deceitful methods and Theseus' failure to understand the realities of his own power severely undercuts and calls political authority into question; meanwhile, that "archaic" patriarchal authority--if not reenforced by the plays ending-- remains unchanged.

Oberon's authority is based, not on any kind of legitimate exercise of power, but on deception. He desires to force Titania to relinquish a changeling child to him, but she remains in defiance to his demand. Frustrated at her rebellion, Oberon resorts to magic and trickery to impose his will upon her and disgrace her in the process. Indeed, when his dark powers cause her to fall in love with an ass, he is delighted, claiming, "this falls out better than I could devise" (Act III.ii 35). Further, Oberon waits until Titania is asleep to carry out his underhanded scheme. Finding her asleep, he administers the magic potion by dripping it on her eyes--a scene that has striking similarity to the poisoning of the sleeping King in Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

Although Oberon eventually brings a type of order to the play, his first attempts blunder and only enhance the already

chaotic situations. Due to Oberon's vague description of Demetrius, Puck enchants the wrong person with the magic potion, and soon the lovers are running amok in total chaotic confusion. This symbolically suggests that political authorities often cause more harm than would have existed if the situation were merely left alone.

Indeed, as Tennenhouse rightly notes, it is the "archaic" authority that caused the original problems in the first place (111). If the patriarchal society was not already in place, Hermia and Lysander could have married over her father's objections, and Demetrius would have had to step aside or possibly even return to Helena. Consequently, Oberon must interfere to fix a problem created out of political authority, and the confusion increases before getting better.

But does Oberon even intend to solve Hermia's problems and bring a final order to the play? He does not. He merely intends to solve Helena's Problems with the "disdainful" Demetrius. He seeks to do so through the same deceptive means that he employs with Titania. In the end, after causing even more chaos, he does bring a harmony between the four lovers--but he does so unwittingly.

Theseus, on the other hand, is portrayed as an ignorant and inept fool. His ability to solve the problems produced by the harsh patriarchal law clearly results from Oberon's interference. When order is once again restored, Theseus is at a loss to understand "how comes this gentle concord in the world..." (IV.i

145). Later, when Hyppolyta notes that all the lover's tales seem to fit miraculously together, he dismisses such things as nonsense:

I never may believe/ These antique fables, nor the
fairy toys./ Lovers and madmen have such seething
brains,/ Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend/ More
than cool reason ever comprehends. (Act V.1 2-6)

From the audience's perspective, the jokes on Theseus, who not only doesn't realize what happened, but is himself merely a character created by a poet. Theseus fails even to understand the workings of his own authority--and this suggests that political authorities are at a similar loss to understand the real workings of the world. Further, the fact that a fairy king's magic saved the day may imply that only a miracle could keep Theseus from making the kind of harsh judgments that led to chaos in the beginning.

(On a different point: Tennenhouse asserts that Theseus symbolically authorizes art when he recognizes the rite of May in the end of Act IV.1 (Tennenhouse 112). However, it is interesting to note that, in the above lines at least, Theseus appears to do just the opposite.)

Furthermore, has the "archaic" patriarchy really changed by the end of the play? It has not. Theseus stood behind the will of Egeus up to the point that Demetrius (a male character) decided he loved Helena instead of Hermia. In such an instance, the father's original plan to marry Hermia to Demetrius was

frustrated. There is no indication that, if Demetrius hadn't changed his mind, Theseus would have gone against his earlier judgments on the matter. Nor do we know that the next woman finding herself in Hermia's original situation would not be sent to a nunnery or be put to death. Meanwhile, Oberon has reasserted his control over Titania, and Theseus still proceeds with his marriage to the Amazon Queen--a female whom he had conquered in battle. Archaic or not, the system has not changed.

Tennenhouse has raised some interesting points. He convincingly portrays the political context of the Elizabethan period as a hostile environment for playwrights who fail to satisfy the authorities in London. However, when he argues that the resolution of the sexual conflicts in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" symbolically authorize political authority, his arguments become less convincing--on further analysis, the portrayals of Oberon and Theseus appear to do just the opposite. Also, by this time the "dream tale" was a highly conventionalized form that authors employed to criticize political authority without taking responsibility for the ideas they expressed. "It was only a dream" the authors would explain--and that is exactly the type of plea that Puck makes at the close of the play (Act V.i 425-432).

Highly argued. I'm not sure you, or Tennenhouse, or anyone, gets to the bottom of Shakespeare's intentions, but, intended or not, there is much ^{that is potentially} subversive about the play, as you deftly reveal through your study of retention of Oberon's & Theseus' power. Of course you also suggest that, if any thing, the play leaves in place the archaic foundations of patriarchy -- which might come down to "might makes right." ... As you may have noticed...

Works Cited

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from many of your class members' responses to the ~~past~~ play,
 it is often view as an apolitical celebration - seeing
 it this way ~~undermines~~ undermines its subversive possibilities.
 A ^{director} ~~producer~~ could radically affect the way we see Oberon +
 Titania, and thus the way we see ~~the~~ the politics of this
 play.