

Sexist Shakespeare vs. Ironic Shakespeare

AUGUST 20, 2007
Shakespeare 345-01
Journal One

In Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream⁵ it is uncertain whether Shakespeare is presenting a parody on gender roles or making a very sexist statement. As ^EMcevoy shares in his chapter about understanding comedy, what all comedies have in common is "their preoccupation with the journey of young women...from the state of virginity to that of marriage" (pg. 139). This is proven true as Hermia is in transition from home life to marriage and is asking to choose her future. Helena is in a similar situation, although she is being brutally rejected, not by state, but by her love. This play in particular accents the patriarchal and state power over individual freedoms. Both individual liberty and sexual passion, as Mcevoy points out, are channeled to the imaginary level where violence is glossed over by pretty words. This transition to the imaginary level leaves one to question why Shakespeare softened actual rough attack on individual freedoms, particularly that of women. Ultimately, despite several disturbances of male power, the men win and dominate the women. By doing so, Shakespeare is pointing out the absurdity of inequality of gender roles.

Journal Entry #1: Midsummer Nights Dream

28 August 2007

An Interpretation of Shakespeare's view on women; *or, Shakespeare as a feminist*
or, Shakespeare as a hypocrite

I have a lot of trouble with the way Shakespeare portrays women. Obviously being a feminist from 2007, my views on how strong females should be portrayed is drastically different than Elizabethan Shakespeare. However, the easily supplied stock description of Hippolyta as a strong female, an Amazon queen, is subverted by her meek acquiescence to Theseus.

Amazons were renowned for their savagery on the battlefield, their sometimes practice of infanticide towards male babies, and their strength of wills and arms. Hippolyta was the queen of the Amazons, a position held by rite of combat, not inherited such as Theseus' dukedom. This draws the conclusion that Hippolyta is an exceptionally skilled tactician, fighter, and cunning warrior. Although I assumed this meant she would have a fiery temper to be able to withstand and stomach the battlefield, she could easily have an amiable nature. However, Shakespeare has Hippolyta playing the doting, if in some passages somewhat petulant bride. She does not directly oppose the duke, she does not seem to have anything to occupy her time and thoughts but her impending nuptials.

This inconsistency in femininity also comes into play with Helena. She claims, "Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex" (A: 2, S: 1, line 240), saying that even though he treats her like the worst dog, the more he beats her the more she fawns on him, she will follow him wherever he goes. Helena is portrayed as a desperate woman, a woman in love, a woman with no shame or modesty when it comes to pursuing her man. We are never told of the extent to the encouragement Demetrius gives her before switching his attentions to Hermia, but Helena's behavior does indeed set a scandal on her sex. She claims she doesn't understand why the two men prefer Hermia to her- but she's a confusing contradiction of bitterness, determination, faithlessness (to keep her friend Hermia's secret), and wanton behavior.

McEvoy seems to strongly support the theory that Shakespeare was promoting feminist ideas for his time, and that by playing on the feminine sensibility, he created a lasting comedy. While the situations that Shakespeare crafts are humorous, I feel that McEvoy is implying that Shakespeare understood women, their desires and goals, the way they tick, and therein wrote true to character. I don't agree with this. I think Shakespeare wrote shallowly on women, using them as stock characters and secondary characters used to shore up the goals and lines of the men.

yes

shallow insight

> suggest & clarify this claim

✓ The role of women in Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night Dream is lost in the control of men. I agree with McEvoy in Chapter 7 of The Basics: Shakespeare, that (pg 150) this does not show the women's power, as eventually they are doing what men wanted them to do. All of the women in the play eventually become in some way subservient to a man. (150) Titania gives away the baby, as Oberon wanted. Hermia marries a man, granted it is her love, Lysander. Helena is subservient to Demetrius all along, even ratting out her dear friend Hermia, to in some way be on a better light of his. Hippolyta marries Theseus. Shakespeare plays a lot of these actions off as the silliness of love; however it also shows the lack of control in which these women have on their own destinies. For example, Hermia does not wish to marry the man her father has chosen for her, and although she believes she is taking control of the situation by running away with the man that she does wish to marry, men resolve it. An example that McEvoy made that I agreed with was the Duke says that she may marry ^Lthe lysander only because of Oberon's spell that makes Demetrius no longer in love with her, but in love with Helena. (150) I think however we see *interesting* that power within them to solve their own problems when we see them stand up for themselves against the men in the play. We see this with Hippolyta in the beginning as well as with Hermia begging for other options and even considering a convent or death rather than marry a man she does not love. I saw this also in woods when both men are in love with Helena. Instead of accepting that now both were in love with her, she bitterly believes that it is a trick.

Journal Entry 1: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The book *Shakespeare: The Basics* delves deep into the male/female aspect of both Elizabethan culture and Shakespeare's plays. Once such instance is seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This book argues that although the female characters are seen at the surface as being strong and independent. One argument is that Hippolyta, though an Amazon queen, does not stand up for herself as she should, and shows weakness and female submission. This may be qualified inasmuch as she is not given many speaking-parts throughout the play and so her views cannot be seen. Although this view can change rapidly depending upon the performance (Hippolyta is often on-stage and given no speaking parts and much can be done to show her will through body-language, etc.), there are several cues throughout the play that show and develop that Hippolyta still retains her free Amazonian spirit.

} this sentence is incomplete

In the beginning of the play when Theseus is condemning Hermia to either marry Demetrius, suffer death, or else live the life of a nun, Hippolyta leaves the stage in an opposite direction than her soon-to-be husband, Theseus (who bids her to follow him). Another such example is when Theseus pardons Hermia at their meeting in the forest. He suddenly and quickly changes his mind when he comes upon them, not appearing the least bit angry—merely confused at the sudden change of feeling. Hippolyta was obviously not approving of Theseus's first verdict on Hermia (and Hermia's father, Egeus has quite obviously not changed his mind about his daughter's marriage to Demetrius) and Theseus has a coincidental and sudden "change of heart"? Theseus said at the beginning of the play that although he won Hippolyta through a battle, he was going to treat her with much more respect and love throughout their married life—

if it quite obvious here that he has taken her opinions to heart. The third and final reason in which Hippolyta retains her assertive manner as Amazonian Queen is the fact that in the very last act, during the play-within-a-play, the only people who critique the play are men—and Hippolyta. She is the only woman who keeps up with the witty banter and jabbing quips of the men around her. This shows her as an equal among the men, able to stand on her own, and quite an independent person.

Through my reading of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, I noted many of what seem to be commentaries about specific aspects of the culture and other societal aspects. What stood out to me the most, however, was how demonstrative this play is of the objectification of women, and alternatively, the power that women have over men as a consequence of this objectification.

useful,
clear
focus

First and foremost in demonstrating the itemization of women is the dilemma that begins the play; Hermia's father wants her to marry Demetrius despite the fact that she does not love him, and because he "owns" her, she can either submit to his will or be put to death. Another example is the relationship between betrothed Hippolyta and Theseus. Hippolyta is a (former) Amazonian queen, and because Theseus defeated her in battle, the impression is given that Hippolyta has submitted to Theseus and completely given up her independence and strength. This is mostly evident in the exchange that occurs between them when Theseus is dictating the options that Hermia has in the aforementioned situation; Hippolyta clearly does not approve of what is happening and despite this fact, she does not say anything. Yet another and perhaps the most convincing example of women being objectified in this play is the "love triangle," if you will, between Demetrius, Hermia and Helena. Demetrius [?]bedded Helena, winning her undying love, and despite this fact, he pursues Hermia instead. He does not take into consideration the consequences of his actions and treats Helena as though she is nothing to him. Another, and my final, example is the conflict between Oberon, the king of the fairies, and his queen, Titania. Oberon wants Titania to submit to his will

with the child that she has "rescued," and she refuses, so he concocts a plan to manipulate and humiliate her into doing what he wants her to.

I also noticed that because of these situations, the men seemed to lose some of their power. Hermia defies her father and ends up getting what she wanted in the first place, essentially making a mockery of the scene he made, Hippolyta seems to reign Theseus in, making him consider the power he has, and because of the situation he himself created, Oberon finds himself jealous and returns to Titania in a more humble manner than he treated her before.

interest

> how so?

plausible

Sean McEvoy's explanation of this play, as well, seems to solidify my thoughts. He notes that great interest is taken in the role of women in the criticism of Shakespeare's plays. McEvoy's writing, in general, made many good points that I found both thoughtful and useful. He states that Shakespeare could only write about his time, and instead of attempting to figure out what he was thinking when he wrote, we should focus on what we can get out of what he wrote. It is also interesting to think that rather than just writing out parts, perhaps Shakespeare wrote out characters with people he knew in mind, as examples. I disagree, however, with how much separation between Shakespeare's time and our own is emphasized. I feel that there are links between every time period, and though, yes, we will read Shakespeare's work with our own beliefs in mind, I think that we can still relate to what was happening in that time period, with those beliefs.

Clarify — relate in what way a sense?

8/27/2007

Thoughts on A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare uses the characters in A Midsummer Night's Dream to create different emotions on stage. The emotion that is the strongest is love. It is ironic because even though the characters are supposed to be sincere their love seems infatuated.

^EMcevoy states that the words that Lysander and Demetrius use while talking about love are cliché and would have drawn laughs from an audience of Shakespeare's time. The use of the love potion expresses the idea that love is not as important as the idea of being in love. It is interesting and a little confusing that after Lysander and Demetrius both reject Hermia she leaves, but after Lysander returns to normal she is content with being with *yes* him. The women of A Midsummer Night's Dream are powerless to the will of the masculine. When Lysander and Hermia repair their relationship Hermia is relieved of any speaking lines and becomes just a figure on stage. It feels like there should be some verbal confrontation between Hermia and Lysander before the audience can just assume that the conflict between the two is smoothed over. The only conflict between the four lovers that matters is the conflict between Demetrius and Lysander. The desires of men are what are seen as important and potentially dangerous. The play of Pyramus is mocked and interrupted by the nobles. In this way Shakespeare turns a comedy out of a tragedy.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Role of Women

Superiority held by men over women is prevalent throughout the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Throughout the play it can be seen that Hippolyta, Hermia, and Helena are suppressed by men in one form or another.

At the start of the play Hippolyta and Hermia are being subjected to marry men against their will. Helena has been dishonored by Demetrius but still pursues him out of love. Looking at Hippolyta who was the Queen of the Amazons, which was "a race of warrior-women who rejected men altogether from their lives," Hippolyta is defeated by Theseus and is forced to marry him, (McEvoy 151).

Hermia's love for Lysander is rejected by her father Egeus, who wants her to marry Demetrius. Egeus presents the case to Theseus, the Duke of Athens, showing a law which essentially leaves Hermia with three choices- either marry Demetrius, face death "or on Diana's altar to protest for aye austerity and single life," (89-90).

It is saddening to see how Helena is infatuated with Demetrius despite the way he degrades and insults her. Demetrius, "made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena, and won her soul, and she, sweet, lady, dotes, devoutly ^tdoes, ^tdoes in idolatry," and yet wants to marry Hermia and brushes off Helena (107-109). It is disappointing to see Helena and Demetrius marry knowing that Demetrius is in love with Helena only because of a love potion. Even worse is the fact that Helena would want to be with him after the way he treated her throughout the play.