

Plagiarism is the substitution of other people's work for one's own including the unacknowledged use of somebody else's words or ideas.

I understand this definition of plagiarism, I have read the School's Policy on Plagiarism, and I state that this essay does not contain any plagiarised material. I have not copied any of it from anywhere or anyone else. I have acknowledged all the sources that I consulted when writing it and I have employed proper citation when using somebody else's words or ideas.

This essay complies with Department of English regulations and guidelines:

YES

NO

**According to Annabel Patterson, A Midsummer Night's Dream "seems rather to
problematize than to celebrate marriage." Discuss.**

Fiona Laffey

EN3107

Dr. Edel Semple

February 27th, 2024

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* portrays marriage at various stages of development as seen through the four lovers, Theseus and Hippolyta's impending nuptials, and Titania and Oberon's marital quarrel. The trials of these couples are presented as comedy to the audience while maintaining the ideals of marriage and the societal expectations at the time. While at face value *Dream* seems to celebrate marriage, it is instead problematized through the patriarchal values held in Elizabethan England. This is seen through the physical and psychological manipulation of women and the disposal of female kinship after marriage.

Love in *Dream* is not won through mutual attraction but physical violence. When talking to his fiancée, Hippolyta, Theseus states, "I wooed thee with my sword and won my love doing thee injuries" (1.1.19). Hippolyta is being forced into this marriage due to being beaten in battle. This marriage of the Hippolyta reflects cultural perceptions of the Amazons at the time and the desire to assimilate these "wild women" into European society. As Montrose writes, "This cultural fantasy assimilates Amazonian myth, witchcraft, and cannibalism into an anti-culture which precisely inverts European norms of political authority, sexual license, marriage practices, and inheritance rules" (66). A society composed of powerful women was seen to be the antithesis of European culture. Interestingly, *Dream* was written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I who famously went unmarried. The desire to have Queen Elizabeth I married, ensuring an heir to England's throne, is now being projected through forceful marriage in *Dream*.

Egeus, Hermia's father, furthers this trend of unwanted marriages by promising Hermia to Demetrius when she loves Lysander. Again, a threat of violence is placed upon women when Egeus states:

"As she is mine, I may dispose of her,
Which shall be either to this gentleman

Or to her death, according to our law

Immediately provided in that case” (1.1.43-45)

Egeus would rather have his daughter killed than permit her to marry Lysander. He has no reason to deny her wishes other than the fact that he is her father, and therefore can choose her husband for her. Theseus sides with Egeus, telling Hermia, “To death or to a vow of single life” (1.1.120). While he offers the alternative of becoming a nun, Theseus also enacts patriarchal control over Hermia and her future marriage. At this moment, Hermia is not a person but an object to be passed between father and husband. Montrose illustrates this saying, “The maiden is surrounded by men, each of whom--as father, lover, or lord--claims a kind of property in her” (67).

In marriage, the dehumanization of women is attained not only through physical violence but also through manipulative tactics. “Jealous Oberon” and “Proud Titania’s” marriage is ripe with conflict and infidelity (2.1.59-60). In their meeting in Athens, Oberon seeks to maintain his control over Titania saying, “Am I not thy lord?” further reflecting the patriarchal ideals in which the wife must be subservient to her husband (2.1.63). In her denial of relinquishing the Indian boy, Titania is denying Oberon’s right to control his wife obtained through marriage. Unhappy marriage, under patriarchal ideals, must be resolved through discipline. Oberon states, “Thou shalt not from this grove till I torment thee for this injury” (2.1.151). Not only is Titania physically trapped in the woods by her husband, but she is also diminished to that of a child being punished for not sharing a toy.

Titania’s punishment is that of psychological manipulation. By dropping a potion into Titania’s eyes, Oberon ensures:

“The next thing then she waking looks upon—

Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,

On meddling monkey, or on busy ape—

She shall pursue it with the soul of love” (2.1.179-182)

Oberon’s use of magic to manipulate Titania’s emotional state calls into question the idea of consent in the relationship between her and Bottom. While there is infidelity within the marriage before this point, Titania does not consciously choose to have sex with Bottom. Titania’s sexuality is controlled and exploited by Oberon. As William Carroll observes, “Neither virginity nor chastity is to be found among the "adults" of the play; but as the one couple's marriage is restored and the other's anticipated, the various sexual transgressions are being regulated and harnessed” (Carroll 159). It is not just Titania and Bottom in this encounter, but also Oberon acting as the mastermind.

Additionally, this union represents an underlying desire to tame powerful women within Shakespeare’s time. Montrose describes this relationship as, an “experience of fleeting intimacy with a powerful female who is at once lover, mother, and queen” (Montrose 65). Bottom, the dramatist, has obtained control over and the dotage of a Queen. The humiliation of Titania serves the patriarchy as both Bottom and Oberon benefit from the removal of her agency.

There are no consequences for Oberon’s drugging his wife, as his removal of the spell on Titania is presented as merciful. This mercy, however, comes only after Titania has relinquished the Indian boy, her connection to her friend, to Oberon. As James Calderwood states, “The quality of mercy is not entirely constrained in Oberon, but it's by no means free and generous either, coming as it does only after he's gotten his humiliating way” (Calderwood 425). Oberon states:

“Now thou and I are new in amity,

And will tomorrow midnight solemnly

Dance in Duke Theseus' house, triumphantly,
And bless it to all fair prosperity.” (4.1.86-89).

Their marriage is only restored after Oberon humiliates Titania and takes her surrogate child, as this marks a restoration in the hierarchy of their marriage as well as the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta (Calderwood 429). This shows how, to Shakespeare, happiness in marriage can only be achieved through patriarchal control and the happiness of the patriarch.

Throughout *Dream*, patriarchal control in marriage is dependent on the upheaval of female relationships. The first marriage shown to the audience exemplifies this narrative, as Hippolyta is forced to break her vows to the Amazons through Theseus' threats of violence. Her devotion to other women is deemed unnatural in Shakespeare's England. Her marriage to Theseus is celebrated and revered rather than condemned, as she finally submits to European standards (Montrose 66).

Oberon, like Theseus, views Titania's female connections to be a threat to the happiness of their marriage. When explaining her possession of the Indian boy, Titania reveals:

“His mother was a vot'ress of my order,
And in the spiced Indian air by night
Full often hath she gossiped by my side...
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;
And for her sake I will not part with him.” (2.1.123-125, 136-137).

There is clearly an intimate connection between these two women as Titania was trusted to raise the child after his mother's death. To Oberon, however, their relationship is foolish when compared to their marriage. This dedication to female kinship is seen as an insult to Oberon's right as husband to control his wife.

Helena and Hermia present the real-time degradation of female kinship in exchange for a heterosexual relationship. Their relationship is described by Helena as, “So, with two seeming bodies but one heart” (3.2.213). The two have a deep connection, having grown up together and acting almost as sisters. This connection is further shown by Helena’s heartbreak when she believes Hermia to be mocking her love for Demetrius stating:

“Is all the counsel that we two have shared,

The sisters’ vows...

Oh, is all forgot?” (3.2.199-203)

These two women have been inseparable since childhood, and yet, are immediately torn apart once the factor of marriage enters their lives. When all is eventually resolved with the lovers, Helena and Hermia do not even speak to one another. In Shakespeare’s world, women are to maintain female kinship as the connection between two women threatens a husband's control over his wife. As Montrose states, “What Oberon accomplishes by substituting Bottom for the boy is to break Titania's solemn vow. As in the case of the Amazons, or of Hermia and Helena, the play again enacts a male disruption of an intimate bond between women” (Montrose 71). Female kinship is seemingly viewed as a substitute for marriage until a husband is found, and the disruption of that kinship is portrayed as the man’s right under the patriarchy.

Marriage in Shakespeare’s *Dream* illustrates the patriarchal values held in Elizabethan England. The women of this play are met with the threat of violence, psychological manipulation, and the disintegration of their friendships all in the name of marriage. While these actions are portrayed as comedic and in celebration of marriage, they are instead a reminder of problematic societal expectations for marriage. The deconstruction of female identity within the

play serves as the journey to a happy marriage, condemning women to losing themselves to maintain the patriarchal standards of that time.

Works Cited

- Calderwood, James L. "A Midsummer Night's Dream: Anamorphism and Theseus' Dream." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1991, pp. 409–30. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870461>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.
- Carroll, William C. "A Midsummer Night's Dream: Monsters and Marriage." *The Metamorphoses of Shakespearean Comedy*, Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 141–77. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zv7b8.10>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.
- Montrose, Louis Adrian. "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture." *Representations*, no. 2, 1983, pp. 61–94. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928384>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, edited by William Montgomery, and John Jowett, Oxford University Press, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uccie-ebooks/detail.action?docID=430321>.