
The Misogynic Perspective in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

As members of a patriarchal society, the women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are obligated to be subservient to the men. Power is only extended to women in the fictional world of Fairyland. This exemplifies the misogyny of the time, where women had no significant societal role in the real world. However, once in the Fairyland, the women are able to make their own choices and demonstrate their true power. Although the males in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are oppressively misogynistic in the “real world,” the supposedly submissive females prove to be the most powerful once they are given the chance to be so in the Fairyland.

Egeus, the father of Hermia, is the most misogynistic male in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He dehumanizes his daughter Hermia by objectifying her and stripping her of her human rights and dignity. As her only parent, Egeus takes responsibility of Hermia and makes all of her choices for her, regardless of her consent: “As she is mine, I may dispose of her” (Shakespeare 5). Egeus’ constant possession over Hermia proves he only sees her as his property, not as a human being. By objectifying his own daughter, he has no qualms with forcing his decisions on her. The most prominent decision Egeus forces upon Hermia is his choice of who she will marry: “She is mine and all my right of her I do estate unto Demetrius” (Shakespeare 6). Not only does Egeus wrongfully give ownership of Hermia to Demetrius, he does not take into account Hermia’s opinion on this matter. Hermia, who is not interested at all in Demetrius, is in love with Lysander.

In this society, marriage is political tool used to elevate the social status. Because Lysander is below Hermia’s social class, Egeus refuses to consider him as an eligible choice: “Oh hell to choose love from another’s eyes” (Shakespeare 8). Hermia is torn between being the obedient daughter she has been raised to be, and longing to marry the man she is in love with. “I would my father looked but with my eyes” (Shakespeare 5). In saying this, Hermia wishes her father would look through her perspective before making decisions for her. Although Egeus insists on choosing her future husband, Hermia desperately tries to convince him otherwise. “Hermia [...] is] thwarted in [her] choice in defiance of the men socially positioned to deny the matches,” (Buccola para 8). Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in a society based on male supremacy, it is seen as unlawful for Hermia to defy her father’s wishes. While Egeus demonstrates the most common form of misogyny, male supremacy, other characters demonstrate different variations of prejudice of women.

Although Demetrius may act in a loving way towards Hermia, he is still openly demeaning and cruel to other women in the play. He constantly degrades Helena, Hermia’s friend, refusing to even treat her as a human being. Helena pleads, “What worser place can I beg in your love

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And yet a place of high respect with me Than to be usèd as you use your dog?" to which Demetrius responds, "Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit For I am sick when I do look on thee," (Shakespeare 8). His treatment of Helena reflects on his view of women: he does not see them as equals, let alone human beings. Regardless of Helena's feelings, Demetrius is relentless in hurting her.

Demetrius displays sexist behavior towards Hermia by trying to force himself upon her. He is in "love" with Hermia, based off of her look and social class, not her character. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Demetrius is describing Hermia, he uses words such as "sweet" and "fair". This demonstrates his lust, not love, for her. His motive of marrying her to gain power is evident in his dire attempts to sway Hermia: "Relent, sweet Hermia And, Lysander, yield Thy crazèd title to my certain right," (Shakespeare 4). He is desperately trying to get Hermia to give into him. Frustrated with the fact that Hermia is being anything other than obedient and agreeable with him, Demetrius exemplifies himself as a result of the patriarchal society he is a part of.

Another example of this patriarchal society is Oberon, the king of the fairies; he does not see his wife, Titania as his equal. As soon as the couple appears onstage during the play, they immediately begin to argue. "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania," (Shakespeare 19). He greets her with hostility and contempt as she enters. Oberon is jealous of the small Indian boy Titania has been caring for and demands that she give him up. "For Oberon is passing fell and wrath Because that she, as her attendant hath A lovely boy stolen from an Indian king. She never had so sweet a changeling. And [...] Oberon [is jealous]," (Shakespeare 18). Oberon sees Titania as his property and does not think she should be caring for anyone other than himself. He becomes jealous when she cares for someone other than himself.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon, like Egeus, treats Titania as his own property. When Titania tries to deny Oberon, he forces himself upon her. She argues, "I have forsworn [your] bed and company." To which Oberon replies, "Tarry, rash wanton; am I not thy lord?" Titania, seeing no means of disentangling herself from this dispute, eventually gave in: "Then I must be thy lady," (Shakespeare 19).

Although Oberon is a fairy, like Puck, he acts misogynistically towards Titania. Oberon's egocentric attitude may be related to his title as king within the fairy community. Shakespeare's connection between misogyny and people in political power connects a hatred of women to a fear of woman whose intellect or political prowess equals or exceeds that of men. Oberon feels threatened and his mistreatment of Titania is a byproduct of his own desire to maintain leadership in the Fairyland: "Shakespeare portrays complex layers of power dynamics, as the play depicts a back-and-forth oscillation of authority and rebellion between the two worlds of Athens and fairy land. A better acknowledgment of the folkloric views concerning the fairy

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queen's authority should reorient the view of power relations in the play and offer a different model of the play's engagement with gender and sexuality," (Wells para 6). The degradation of Titania by Oberon reveals an attempt to stifle Titania's leadership and allows Oberon to view her as less of a threat. Puck, merely a servant, holds no exceptional position within the royal court, giving him no reason to fear or hate women for their potential to surpass him. Oberon acts the most misogynistically in the Fairyland because he is in the greatest position of power and, therefore, feels the most threatened by opposition.

When Puck inhabits the Fairyland his actions and character reflect the ideals of the fictional world in contrast to the sexism and bigotry which plagued the "real world" in the 16th century. Puck's character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a foil to Oberon's. While Puck, the jester, is childish, cheerful, and mischievous, King Oberon is his opposite: serious, solemn, and vengeful. Of the two, Puck symbolizes the fairies more accurately: "Shakespeare rendered the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* perhaps more good-natured than the devil's kin, but still something less than kind. David P. Young, for example, asserts of the fairies that "Their benevolent presence in this play serves to emphasize the comic context only if they are recognized as potentially dangerous" (Buccola para 11). Puck has these characteristics depicted by Buccola and Young; although he is not cruel like Oberon, he is not completely good, as he plays tricks on others. Puck's interaction with the women shows that unlike Egeus, Demetrius, and Oberon, all men of power, he does not act in a misogynistic nature.

A phenomenon unique in Fairyland is the capability of women to stand up against empowered men. Titania, the wife of Oberon, frequently asserts herself over Oberon: "She is icily haughty and insists on having her way, although, since she and Oberon are elemental forces of nature, their dispute is causing bad weather, as she vividly describes in 2.1.88–117. During Titania's enchantment she is a vapid lover, and afterward, she merely serves a decorative role. Her chief qualities are regal pride and grand diction," (Hudson Shakespeare Company para 19). Because Titania is the queen of the Fairyland, she is able to resist Oberon and his overbearing misogyny. Buccola characterizes Titania as: "Central among the 'actual' fairy characters in the play is the fairy queen. Popular belief almost universally construed fairyland to be under the sway of a female monarch, not always paired with a male consort as is Shakespeare's Titania," (para 9). Because Titania has power, she is able to lead without the need of a male presence.

Through her perseverance and the eventual overcome of her battle between her father's tight grip on her and her longing to have her own life, Hermia proves herself to be one of the most powerful characters. Because this play is set in a patriarchal society, Hermia is obligated to be subservient to the males in her life. However, Hermia finds fault with this system and makes it her mission to defy it: "He no more shall see my face; Lysander and myself will fly this place," (Shakespeare 16). Because her father is forcing her into marrying a man she is not in love with, she defies her father and marries who she truly loves. Not only does Hermia defy her father, she

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also denies Demetrius, something that is unheard of in this time. Hermia, after freeing herself from her father's tightly wound grip of her life choices, is finally able to make decisions on her own. After she runs away to the Fairyland with Lysander, she is able to live freely. The Fairyland, unlike the "real world" allows her to make her own choices. With this newly awarded power, Hermia marries Lysander. Hermia, after freeing herself from her father's tightly wound grip of her life choices, is finally able to make decisions on her own. After she runs away to the Fairyland with Lysander, she is able to live freely. The Fairyland, unlike the "real world" allows her to make her own choices. With this newly awarded power, Hermia marries Lysander.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the males use their naturally given power to reign over the women. This is because of the patriarchal society *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in. Yet, once they arrive into the Fairyland, the newly empowered women use this power to stand up against and defy the males. Such an association of powerful women with fantasy highlights the absurdity and futility of the notion.

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