
The Importance and Function of Hippolyta's Character

In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the minor character Hippolyta functions in three ways. Her first role in the play is as an example of mature love in juxtaposition to the two immature Athenian couples. Her second purpose in the play is to aid in answering the question "Can love follow conquest?." Her final function is to act as a voice of reason and clarification for the audience. Even though Hippolyta is a minor character in the play, her part is critical to the development of the play's major themes of love and understanding. Hippolyta and Theseus begin *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by discussing their plans to marry. They remain true to one another throughout the course of the play, until finally marrying in the end. Shakespeare juxtaposes them against Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander's unstable relationships. He portrays the Athenian lovers as irrational because of their arbitrary love for one another. Their love is superficial and the objects of it change several times during the play. Demetrius is unable to explain his sudden love for Helena when he says, "I wot not by what power- / But by some power it is-my love to Hermia, / Melted as the snow" (IV, i, 167-169). After saying these lines, he absurdly makes plans to immediately marry Helena, even though his love for her is arbitrary. Hippolyta's relationship with Theseus is not tainted or changed with magic, as is the case with the Athenian lovers' relationships. The magic the Athenian lovers experience represents the immaturity and uncertainty of their love.

Even though Hippolyta's relationship with Theseus appears to be more stable and mature than the Athenian lovers', it is still based on the conquests of war. After Theseus conquers the Amazons, Hippolyta must become his wife. Their relationship is not hateful and cruel like Helena and Demetrius' relationship is at the beginning of the play, however there is still noticeable tension. This poses the question "Can conquest result in love?." Theseus comments that he "wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love, doing thee injuries;" (I, i, 16-17). This apparent paradox is not the typical standard of true love. When the couple goes hunting Theseus seems to recognize the effort he must put forth to conquer Hippolyta's heart (IV, i, 122-128). He tries to impress her with his dogs' howling even though she has said there is none better than the howling of Hercules' dogs. The howling is like music to Hippolyta, which is symbolic because it represents harmony. She does not believe she will have harmony in her life with Theseus, because it is a result of war. Hippolyta shows that love is not won on a battlefield. However, the couple has only mild disagreements for the continuance of the play. The idea that she will grow to love him emerges with the symbolic dance of Titania and Oberon (V, i, 402-424). Their dance signifies harmony and order for the couple.

Hippolyta's final function is to aid the audience in sorting through the disorder and chaos of the play. Her literal mindedness and rational nature allow her to clarify the mysterious and magical

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events of the play for the audience. Her fiancé, Theseus, is the most powerful mortal in the play, however Hippolyta proves to use less imagination and more reasoning than he does. Theseus sees the Athenian lovers as being without reason because "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact" (V, i, 7-8). On the other hand, Hippolyta uses reason to prove the lover's stories true, because all of their stories coincide with one another. This enables the audience to realize the previous scenes actually happened, even though they are full magic and other ethereal components. Later, Hippolyta comments symbolically, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" with regard to the mechanics' rendition of "Thisbe and Pyramus"(V, i, 211). Her comment on the play is like that of an audience member's comment on "A Midsummer Night's Dream," because of the ridiculous events that occur. Theseus' reply that one should use his or her imagination to better understand it shows how Shakespeare intends the audience to view the play. Hippolyta clarifies for the audience again, adding that it is the audience, not the characters, that use their imagination. She illuminates the way the audience should respond to A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Even though Hippolyta only appears in three scenes of the play, her contributions are essential to the play's development. Her demonstration of mature love functions as the standard that the Athenian lovers never reach. The juxtaposition of Hippolyta's relationship against the other lovers' relationship shows the irrational, superficial, and arbitrary nature of the latter group's love. Hippolyta also shows that love can emerge from conquest and war. Her love for Theseus emerges after order and harmony resumes in their world. Lastly, Hippolyta acts as a voice of reason and clarification for the audience. Her rational insights allow the audience to understand the events surrounding the Athenian lovers, as well as the play as a whole. Hippolyta's three functions as a minor character contribute immensely to plot and understanding of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Without the character of Hippolyta, the play would lack in theme, substance, and clarity.

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