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## Who Needs Men? Titania's World and Shakespeare's Argument for Marriage In A Midsummer Night's Dream

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## Who Needs Men? Titania's World and Shakespeare's Argument for Marriage In A Midsummer Night's Dream

### Abstract

What is the best context for understanding and enjoying Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? The play was probably written in 1594-95, then just before or after *Romeo and Juliet*. With its farce of tragic love in the play of Pyramus and Thisby ("very tragical mirth" 5.1.57), is the play a witty rejoinder to that of the star-crossed lovers, making the pair of plays an exercise in the range of romantic genres?

### Keywords

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### Comments

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Who Needs Men? Titania's World and Shakespeare's  
Argument for Marriage In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

What is the best context for understanding and enjoying Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? The play was probably written in 1594-95, then just before or after *Romeo and Juliet*. With its farce of tragic love in the play of Pyramus and Thisby ("very tragical mirth" 5.1.57), is the play a witty rejoinder to that of the star-crossed lovers, making the pair of plays an exercise in the range of romantic genres? Was the play written to celebrate a noble wedding, perhaps that of Elizabeth Vere to William, Earl of Derby or (more likely?) that of Elizabeth Carey, granddaughter of Lord Hunsdon, who as Lord Chamberlain was the patron of Shakespeare's company?<sup>1</sup> Or is it the context of the public stage, where, according to the first quarto, "it hath been sundry times publickly acted"? London theatregoers (literally—they were attending a stage called "The Theatre") would have responded particularly to Shakespeare's sendup of his theater's own conventions in the play rehearsed and performed by Bottom and his bodies. Or is the conversation between Theseus and Hippolyta at the beginning of Act 5, after the play's crucial action has been fulfilled in a triple wedding, one which argues for the power of the poet's imagination, the keynote of the play? Is it centrally about the act of creating, embodying, and performing a work of art? In this vein, Siegel suggests that Shakespeare writes "not only for all time but for the occasion" (139), and that's not bad. Audiences at the public stage may have caught a whiff, either via rumor or from the play's lyricism, that they were like uninvited guests at a recent wedding; noble audiences could revel not just in private meanings (lost to us) but in the contrast between their own experience and the one implied on other stages.

Here is an exchange uttered as an aside to the performance of the “rude mechanicals” (3.2.9) late in the play:

HIPPOLYTA. This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.

THESEUS. The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

HIPPOLYTA. It must be your imagination, then, and not theirs. (5.1.209-12)

Among the things that Shakespeare is doing here—which includes setting Hippolyta up to be moved by the silliness she here disparages, but also reminding us through the word “shadows” that we are watching a play—he is highlighting the necessary imaginative role the audience must play in the drama. Taking our cue from Hippolyta’s last line, we are perhaps free to imagine productively. This is what Siegel means when he suggests,

By reading the play with the occasion constantly in our minds, by becoming the wedding guests in our imagination, we can recapture something of the total aesthetic experience of its first-performance audience, an experience which adds to the experience of the audiences of all ages a teasing piquancy of its own. (139)

As an aside, consider Shakespeare’s demure confidence in conceiving (if that is what he did) a marriage entertainment in which we watch newlyweds watch a play. Of course, this means that the silly play, performed with great sincerity but little skill, stands in for Shakespeare’s own work. “Shucks; ‘twern’t nothin’ at all,” he seems to say to his audience.<sup>2</sup> Seen from another angle, he creates a stunning contrast between the play which the on-stage audience is witnessing and his own imagined world where, like Hippolyta a little later, “Beshrew [our] heart[s], [we] pity” the characters (adapted from Hippolyta’s “Beshrew my heart, I pity the man” 5.1.286). Thus some of the most productive imaginings around the play do indeed have to do with its possible origin, and nearly certain use, as wedding entertainment. We will never recover the private meanings and inside information available to an original audience—and particularly some happy couple who is called upon “To wear away this long age of three hours / Between our

after-supper and bedtime” (5.1.33-34).<sup>3</sup> This, by the way, is a promise the play fulfills. But the multiple layers of plot and character, as well as the circles of sophistication that move in Act 5 from the silly players, to the audience of young lovers and the Duke with his new Duchess, to the fairies who are sometimes visible in modern productions of the play (they have promised to “Dance in Duke Theseus’ house triumphantly” [4.1.88], and they return in the final scene of the play—they are in the neighborhood) to the audience in the theatre suggest the kind of experience of wedding guests during the skits and storytelling that often occur at current weddings. Not everyone gets the same jokes, and somebody gets the seats at the far corner of the room. So we can imagine the lovely couple recognizing themselves in details meant only for them and their inner circle. Notice the interesting reversal here that when the play is performed publically, we become the insiders—the viewers with the most insight into the entire drama, its characters, its rhetoric, its themes. We become the lovely couple.

But if private meanings are tantalizing yet lost, we can still imagine that the action staged for us in Act 5 has actually occurred just before the play opens—the newlyweds, a pair or more, have just returned from the ceremony, perhaps have celebrated with a feast, and now settle down to attend to the entertainment. Of course, it’s just as possible that Shakespeare wants to reproduce for us that experience. The wedding invoked may be our own! Nonetheless, if we are to assume that in the world outside the play a wedding has taken place, then the drama enacted is presented as a sort of flashback. This is evident when in the opening dialogue Theseus and Hippolyta anticipate their “nuptial hour” (1) four days hence and when, in the next exchange, Theseus’s call for “merriments” (12) is overturned by old Egeus’s intruding “vexation” (22). From the point of view of the newly married, who expect to see home movies of their lives, apparently they must rewind—they must go backward in order to go forward. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that he will invite them to relive the experiences leading to their marriage and even to experience, through the means of the imagination, what it takes to get to where they

are. They are invited to relive—or even to re-feel—the past in order to understand their present and move into their future. In that experience lies instruction, or better, insight.

The instruction begins with some destabilization in the rest of 1.1 where the definition of true love gets blurred. In a paper presented at this conference long ago, I argued that 1.1 of this play presents us (and its characters) with mostly unresolved, competing definitions of love. Discord before concord, as we might expect. Act 1.1 serves then as a compendium of definitions of love, one governed by a sort of kitchen-sink mentality. We begin with the opposites-attract love displayed by Theseus and Hippolyta (their relationship is often depicted as under strain in modern productions).<sup>4</sup> Egeus then makes a case for parental prerogative in love (“obedience” 37), contrasting his view with what he sees as the bewitching power of romantic love (27). Theseus reinforces Egeus’s patriarchal position when he later advises Hermia “To fit your fancies to you father’s will” (118). Hermia says she’s made bold by a mysterious “power” (54) and later claims for herself autonomy over her “virgin patent,” requiring her soul’s consent before she gives up her “sovereignty” (80, 82).<sup>5</sup> Theseus, in a speech that is not without sympathy (he invites Hermia to “question” her “desires” 67), offers her the alternative of chaste religious devotion (another form of love). And in a joke meant to point up Shakespeare’s kitchen-sink approach, Lysander gives this advice to his rival Demetrius regarding Egeus, “Do you marry him” (94).<sup>6</sup> Lysander then refers to Helena’s love for Demetrius as doting love: “and she, sweet lady, dotes, / devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry” (we get the point! 108-09). Indeed, of all the kinds of love mentioned, doting love will govern much of the play’s action.

Skipping forward a bit, Helena offers a summary lament, though little clarification, for the vagaries of love in her well-known speech near the end of the scene which begins “How happy some o’er other some can be!” (226). Cue, “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?” Her couplet,

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,

Love can transpose to form and dignity (232-33)

comes as close as any lines to expressing one of the play's central themes, in which love transforms us either into fools or true lovers (or both). As the earlier compendium has suggested, love is difficult to pin down, contrary, and transforming. We really don't know yet whether this is good or bad.

When the royal couple withdraws, Hermia and Lysander resolve to elope, escaping "the sharp Athenian law" (162). They are, I would suggest, suffering from Romeo-and-Juliet syndrome, believing that "the course of true love never did run smooth" (134). When Hermia informs Helena of her plans, her leave-taking winds back the timeline of love that the opening of the play invokes for a wedding reception audience—to childhood. Suggestively, the place of the lovers' midnight meeting will be where the two young girls had escaped for pillow talk:

And in the wood, where often you and I  
 Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,  
 Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,  
 There my Lysander and myself shall meet  
 And thence from Athens turn away our eyes  
 To seek new friends and stranger companies.  
 Farewell, sweet playfellow. Pray thou for us,  
 And good luck grant thee thy Demetrius!  
 Keep word, Lysander. We must starve our sight  
 From lovers' food till morrow deep midnight. (214-23)

The place Hermia describes is the central locus of the play. Not only, as described here, is it a place of fond memory for the women but it is also one suggestive of an erotic future. We later learn it is the place where Titania chooses to sleep and so where she is drugged and experiences love as only Bottom can give it. It appears also to be the same place where Quince holds his rehearsal, where tired lovers fall asleep, and, presumably, where the couples are awakened the next morning. For a secret and secluded place in the woods, it's pretty busy!

More importantly, with “Farewell, sweet playfellow,” Hermia initiates an important theme in the play—one that we might suggest is directed especially at any brides in the audience: with every cleaving there is a leaving, to adapt language from the marriage ceremony. More precisely, part of the argument for marriage that this play enacts is a movement from pre-adolescent same-sex friendship, epitomized by the BFF relationship between Hermia and Helena, through the unstable, overheated state of adolescence to the more mature, more stable, heterosexual attachments that will sustain, and be sustained by, marriage. From one kind of concord, then, to discord, to a deeper concord.

Such transitions are not easy, and while Hermia’s lines here are sweetly charged with fond memory, they can bring pain, particularly for Helena. This is clear in her lament, already cited, and becomes central to her response to Hermia in the woods when she believes Hermia is part of a cruel game to embarrass her. She begins where Hermia left off in Act One, almost bringing us back to that past place of tender togetherness:<sup>7</sup>

Is all the counsel that we two have shared—  
 The sisters’ vows, the hours we have spent  
 When we have chid the hasty-footed time  
 For parting us—oh, is all forgot?  
 All schooldays’ friendship, childhood innocence? (3.2.198-202)

She goes on to describe how they would share needlework, repeating the word *one* for emphasis—“Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion” (205)—and concludes,

So we grew together,  
 Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
 But yet an union in partition,  
 Two lovely berries molded on one stem. (208-11)

The language of unity and oneness here is remarkable, suggesting Shakespeare has in mind the marriage declaration that “they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). There must be “partition” before

a new union. Helena hints at as much when she moves from the past to the present:<sup>8</sup> “And will you rend our ancient love asunder, / *To join with men* in scorning your poor friend” (215-16, my emphasis). As Garber puts it, “This idyllic vision of undifferentiated mutuality is ruptured by adolescence, by courtship, and by heterosexual desire” (226). But Garber is a right to add that “the comic energies of this play . . . pull in another direction” (226). Shed a tear for the past, but don’t walk out of the wedding reception.

Louis Montrose says that in this play “as in *As You Like It*, the dramatic process that forges the martial couplings simultaneously weakens the bonds of sisterhood and strengthens the bonds of brotherhood” (132). I’m not sure I agree. While the men are rivals in Act 1 and seem friendlier by the end of Act 4, we just have no evidence that they have become fast friends. In fact the play seems to lean toward seeing the male and female pairs as reinforcing each other, not as suggesting the contrasts Montrose sees. And though the women are at extreme odds in the middle of the play and woods, in a play where the keynote is “amity” (4.1.86), it would seem strange to suggest that their relationship is finally weakened, though it must make room for new commitments.

Two features of Hermia and Helena’s complementary speeches regarding their childhood bring us to another female character in the play, Titania, Queen of the Fairies. The first is the metaphoric, lyric features of the speeches—they are both set pieces which are very evocative of idyllic worlds. The second is their women-only emphasis. Montrose would have us get to Titania through Hippolyta, the other woman in the play and an Amazon. And of course it is Shakespeare’s practice to link the women at all levels of the plot (even the cross-dressing male actor playing one), and she is the first woman we meet. Her role is small, but with Theseus forms the framing action of the play—and if we consider the play in terms of wedding entertainment—they stand for the couple.<sup>9</sup> What Hippolyta most brings to the play is her mythical import: she represents the unruly, powerful, attractive, threatening female figure—part of a warrior race and a matriarchy. And while a patriarchal reading of the play sees her as in

need of taming,<sup>10</sup> neither the evidence of her character in the play or the action (Garber's "comic energy") leans us in that direction. The traits of the Amazon are more fluid than this, as are (though this is not the place to argue them) Protestant instructions for marriage. It is interesting that in the opening dialogue of the play, the reputedly rational Theseus is the one who cannot wait for their wedding day while Hippolyta is more restrained, even rational.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare does not mind playing with stereotypes.

And the context of the play we have been trying on here would suggest that in Hippolyta the playwright means to compliment the bride who is being entertained (she is beautiful, autonomous, and strong) while reminding her that she must give a little to form a happy union. If this contemporary description of Amazon culture is invoked in the play, "that Matrimonie was not a mean of libertie but of thraldome" (Andre Thevet [1568], quoted in Montrose 130), the play is in part designed to counter that claim.

A common thread here is a world in which men are irrelevant and unnecessary, as they were to young girls having a campout and also to a female warrior. Which brings us, as I've said once before, to Titania. The Queen of Fairies is the only married woman in the play, and our introduction to her and Oberon does not offer up a vision of domestic bliss. This fact is central to the play's structure, of course, as Shakespeare brings us to the woods in order to invert expectations. Their mother of all domestic spats is like a *Honeymooners'* skit at a wedding reception: one that comically depicts the lovely couple some years hence. But Titania's world is also one in which love literally makes the world go round. Describing a natural world that is experiencing grave disorder, she concludes, "And this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension. / We are their parents and original" (2.2.115-17). The stray note of "parents" is Shakespeare's way of evoking the theme of offspring, tied to marriage. More to the point, discord in love brings a kind of universal unhappiness, and in the world of the play, Oberon and Titania's feud registers as both the source and epitome of the play's love problems.

They are fighting about “a little changeling boy” (120) in Titania’s possession but claimed by Oberon. Montrose, I think, goes too far in imputing the Amazons’ attitude to male offspring—whom they either sent back to their male consorts or killed—upon Titania in order to place her in the wrong (125). Garber does better to call him an “emblem of desire—irrational, unattainable” (219).<sup>12</sup> But he’s essentially a MacGuffin: they are fighting because they are fighting. See *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

In her next speech after the one just cited, Titania explains to Oberon why she will not, probably against custom, give up the child:

Set your heart at rest.

The Fairyland buys not the child of me.  
 His mother was a vot’ress of my order,  
 And in the spicèd Indian air by night  
 Full often hath she gossiped by my side  
 And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands,  
 Marking th’ embarkèd traders on the flood,  
 When we have laughed to see the sails conceive  
 And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;  
 Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait,  
 Following—her womb then rich with my young squire—  
 Would imitate, and sail upon the land  
 To fetch me trifles, and return again  
 As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.  
 But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;  
 And for her sake do I rear up her boy,  
 And for her sake I will not part with him. (2.3.121-38)

The first thing to notice about this beautiful speech is its sensuous, evocative tone. The set piece is a feast for the senses: The air is “spicèd,” the sand “yellow,” the gait of the pregnant woman “swimming,” the “trifles” lovely to the touch (or the taste?). The evocative description of the passage is enhanced by the metaphor of commerce: the sea is full of ships “rich with merchandise.” The world is one of plentitude, leisure, beauty, and enjoyment. This, of course, is rhetoric: Titania makes her case by powerfully evoking an idyllic scene. We want to open a Corona, not argue about a little boy. It’s a set-up, too, as the lovely scene, a pleasing fantasy, is punctured by the reality of death associated with childbirth.

The next note is one of intimacy—reminding us of the sisterhood described by Hermia and Helena. The mother is dedicated to Titania—her “vot’ress”—but she is also an intimate gossip. While she serves Titania, her desire “To fetch me trifles and return again” has more to do with volition and reciprocity than with servitude. As it turns out, the mother’s fetched trifles, tokens of dedication and of love, are replaced by the boy—he is the final gift bestowed upon Titania by her “vot’ress.” Which brings us to the central metaphor of this speech: the mother becomes the ship, which she “imitate[s].” The word “rich” is transferred directly from the ship (“rich with merchandise”) to the young woman (“rich with my young squire”). Her swaying, pregnant hips make her seem to sail like a ship (I’m working backwards), and then this: “When we have laughed to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind.” But here’s the problem: where are the men? Titania has described the ships’ sails as if they may “grow big-bellied” of their own accord in a kind of parthenogenesis. The same seems to be true of the mother. Shakespeare has had Titania create an idyllic, fantasy world where men have been written out of the picture. We know then that this world, for all its allure, is unrealistic, even not to be wished for. It’s not that the young woman is punished by death in such a world, but we are led to associate the ultimate failure of that world with the tragic conclusion of the story.

What Shakespeare has done here, I think, is create his own argument, different from Titania's and directed at Herrick's virgins or at a new bride: he presents an appealing, sensuous, self-contained world of feminine exclusivity that, it turns out, is just a "shaping fantasy," to borrow that phrase from the play. Better, then, to accommodate one's self to the real world, full of vicissitude and emotion as it may be. There it is still able to achieve "something of great constancy" to borrow Hippolyta's line (5.1.26). Let the dancing begin!

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<sup>1</sup>See Wiles, *Shakespeare's Almanac* (136ff).

<sup>2</sup>Wiles writes, "Shakespeare may be seen as offering a humorous apology and justification for the presence of his own company at an aristocratic wedding" (45).

<sup>3</sup>If the goal of the play is to reach bedtime, Oberon's final lines, which direct the fairies to bless the house's bride-beds, completes this action. Wiles suggests that "this house" and "the best bride-bed" (5.1.396-98) are located not in the play but that "There is a real bed in a real house that needs to be blessed. The time is really past midnight, and not the afternoon of a public performance" (ix).

<sup>4</sup>There are reasons for this, beginning with Hippolyta's silence after her first speech in the scene: even Theseus notices, asking, "What cheer, my love" (1.1.122) as he exits. The potential for doubling, whether thematic or dramatic, with the fairy couple also influences how this betrothed couple is perceived.

<sup>5</sup>Hermia's full speech, responding to Theseus's choice between becoming a nun or marrying the wrong guy, is this:

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,  
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up  
Unto His Lordship, whose unwished yoke  
My soul consents not to give sovereignty. (1.1.79-82)

The speech deftly summarizes Reformation debate on marriage and gender roles, particularly if we can see the word "Lordship" (which seems first to simply refer to Demetrius) as also suggestive of a status of superiority. The language of the speech is partly legal ("patent," "consents"), partly biological/social ("virgin") and mostly biblical "unwished yoke," "soul," and even "sovereignty," the gospel through they eyes of the Wife of Bath.

<sup>6</sup>The taunt has a middle-school quality to it, hinting at the play's theme of adolescence giving way to maturity.

<sup>7</sup>Garber says, "the memory of this moment is already nostalgic" (226).

<sup>8</sup>In his fine book on the romances, Douglas Peterson demonstrates how characters in Shakespearean romances must recover their past in order move into a renewed future.

<sup>9</sup>Siegel writes, "The wedding guests could not miss the flattering similarity between the Elizabethan bridal couple and the gracious, exalted pair of legendary antiquity" (139).

<sup>10</sup>Montrose does not fully valorize this reading, though he does see the play in terms of gender and power. He cite lines early in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably written by Shakespeare, that address the Hippolyta of that play to this effect: "The passage registers Hippolyta's imposing combination of physical beauty and physical strength as something wonderful but also something unnatural and dangerous, and requiring masculine control" (130).

<sup>11</sup>Olson, while not imputing this view on the play, reports that Amazons in the Elizabethan era "had come to signify a false usurpation of the duties of the male reason by the lower, female passions" (102).

<sup>12</sup>She adds, using Gerard's term, that this is "'mimetic desire,' the desire for someone else's desire" (219).

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