

**Female Characters in Shakespeare's Comedy: A Midsummer's Night**

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**Abstract**

Shakespearean comedies have been studied from different aspects by various critics, but very few critics have studied these comedies from a feminist perspective. Actually, there is a space and scope for a study the women characters in his comedies. The present study intends to focus on related such issues. The paper intends to show that Shakespeare apparently seems to project feminism and sometime a liberal attitude towards his women. Most of the women in Shakespeare's comedies are very submissive and conventional. It also reflects the diverse socio-cultural trends of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. His female characters often tell us about his view of women and their status in his time. The paper is about female characters in his comedy A Midsummer Night's Dream. In this comedy he introduced four female characters. Their background is totally different. Hippolyta represents the leadership in the mortal world. Titania is another leading character who is the queen of the fairy land. In this comedy other two characters are Hermia and Helena .They represent young women who are trying to find the right partner for themselves. Helena loves Demetrius who loves Lysander. This play is divided into three parts. In the beginning, we have a world of Athens, where life is organized by law; the middle part of this play takes place in the magical wood where the fairies control the irrational events and cause a lot of discord, and finally a return to the normal world where all mismatched couples can resolve their troubles and a triple wedding takes place which is the ultimate happy end for a comedy .The four female characters are analyzed as their behavior, their image of themselves and the relationship to the men. The paper is trying to analyze these four characters in detail. The aim of this paper is to find out similarities and contrasts between these characters.

**Key Words:** comedy, feminist perspective, female characters, Elizabethan Era....

**Introduction:**

The play Midsummer's Night Dream was released during the Elizabethan society. Therefore Shakespeare incorporates the era's rules into the play by creating Athens, which is a metaphor to the Elizabethan nation. Women like the Queen Elizabeth were supposed to be pure virgin act humble and submissive to their owners (fathers & husbands) in this play. Helena, Hermia and Hippolyta are women residing in the Athenian Society. Sakespeare's views on

women are shown in Midsummer Night's Dream, through Helena's desperation, Hermia's recklessness and Hippolyta's hypocritical behavior, as they rebel against the Athenian society and laws. A.R. Humphreys in his introduction to Much Ado about Nothing (2000) has paid attention to almost every aspect of his comedies, like language, poetry, plot construction, characterization and social realism, but he has not focused upon the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's comedies. Cedric

Watts, in his introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, has also briefly paid attention to the portrayal of women (2004). The study is based on just the women characters elaborated in his comedies. His comedies are *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His comedies strengthen and support the patriarchy and patriarchal values. Most important thing is Feminist Criticism examines the ways in which literature undermines or reinforces the social, political and economic status of women.

Juliet Dusinberre has examined the nature of Shakespearean women in her book (2003), to suggest that Feminism started with Shakespeare. In the contemporary period of Shakespeare, it seems that he introduced an unusual amount of deep female characters in his comedies. Each heroine has unique qualities in his comedies. Beautiful but unworldly Miranda seems to be totally controlled by her father Prospero, but she shows a strong will in planning a shared future with FERDINAND and she is aware of her superiority to the savage Caliban.

Viola in *Twelfth Night* is in a way almost opposite of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, the character of Miranda is important for at least two reasons in *The Tempest*. First, she is the only female character who appears in the entire play. She is really very beautiful and no any reader able to compare her beauty to any other female in the world of *The Tempest*. Although she does not speak many lines, her role is crucial for the developments of the events in the play. Besides her beauty, she was taught by

Prospero every day and is therefore very intelligent and she has never been touched by another male. He makes Miranda even more desirable by including the fact that she has never seen or even talked to a man except to her father and Caliban. When she sees Ferdinand the first time she comments: "This / Is the third man that e'er I saw, (...)" (1.2, 445-6). Miranda appears to be a compassionate and gentle, but also quite passive heroine. Her actions are controlled and predicted by her father in a play. Her important role is not to develop self-reliance, but to serve as a vehicle in order to solve a political problem. The story is framed by the power struggle between Prospero and his brother Antonio. Miranda treats evil characters like Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian in an equal manner. She trusts in the honesty of mankind.

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind, in her first appearance in the play is melancholic about her father's banishment. Celia meanwhile tries to cheer her up and even pledges by her honour (1.2, 20-1) to give the throne to Rosalind in the case of Duke Frederick's death. In a play, Rosalind is presented with a lot of wit and is thus able to recognize that her sudden devotion to Orlando made her act foolishly. Orlando's poems do not acknowledge Rosalind's personality or individuality, comparing Rosalind to mere objects like jewel(s)" (III.2, 86) and describing her by using features of goddesses and important women of Roman and Greek mythology (iii.2, 142-4).

The female characters in *Midsummer's Night*:

Hippolyta: At the beginning of the play Hippolyta, a fighting Amazon leader, is

going to marry Theseus who fought against her and her people. He wins her heart in the battle.

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,  
And won thy love doing thee injuries;  
But I will wed thee in another key,  
With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling.  
(I.i.16-19)

It reveals that she was so impressed by his military skills and his superiority that she felt attracted to him or she was submitting to him. Actually, her calm and passive behavior we observe at the beginning of the play. When first act opens, everything appears in a systematic order. Hippolyta and Theseus are watching their wedding that is about to take place in four days. She seems to be pre-occupied with her own thoughts and situation or she simply stays out of her husband's business. Her next appearance is in the fourth act when she accompanies Theseus, Egeus and a hunting party. The scene shows that she is still strongly connected to the past i.e. her home country. She has a strong mind she does not change her opinion easily. Her character is confident. Sometimes, she openly expresses her opinion: "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard."(V.i.208)

Hermia :

Hermia is the daughter of Egeus who appears in the first act of the play accompanied with her father and her two suitors Demetrius and Lysander. Here the play expresses the conflict between father's rule and Athen's law. Egeus wants his daughter to marry Demetrius whom he believes to be a better choice of husband. Hermia's love for Lysander is stubbornly

ignored by the father. Hermia refuses to marry the man she does not love. She was not accepting her father's decision. In the case of her, her father seems very much possessive. Hermia is a strong-willed character and very much firm about her decisions. She wants to live her life the way she believes it would be best of her interest. She talks about her love in a very strong way. She is persistent and not willing to change her mind and accept Demetrius as her husband. She is also aware that her behavior is not appropriate for a woman who should be submissive and timid. Her boldness is also very much important in the play. Her refusal to marry Demetrius will lead either into death or solitary life as a nun in a cloister, she expresses her acceptance of any punishment boldly as long as she does not have to do something she does not choose to:

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.(I.i.79-82)

In the beginning, there is a serious situation in the scene where Hermia refuses to obey her father's orders and marry the man he chose for her. Her refusal is interpreted by Linda Bamber as "a rebellion of the feminine against the power of masculine authority." Hermia's disagreement with her father is immediately followed by a threat of punishment. She takes the destiny in her own hands and is eager to break out of her father's narrow minded world without thinking about the consequences.

In the next scene she is in woods which is starting point of their escape route. This scene shows her determination and straightforwardness. Then in another scene she awakes from a nightmare. Her dream was warning because she dreams of a serpent which eats her heart away while Lysander is watching and laughing. When she wakes up she finds herself in desperate need for comfort and soothing words of her lover who could help her overcome these negative feelings. She has to face here an irrational situation.

HELENA: Helena is a daughter of Nedar, a member of Theseus court and a friend of Hermia. She is one of the most talkative characters. She also demonstrates great platonic love and sisterly devotion to Hermia. She dismisses love as a foolish child but she is not as delightful character as As You Like It's Rosalind. Because love makes Helena a fool. She is self-pitying character all the time. In the play, when Demetrius and Lysander both fall for Helena, she can't believe them. She is the best representative of unrequited love. At the end of the play she is skeptical when she comes to know that Demetrius still loves her. She needs to overcome her own insecurities. She is depicted as so extreme. Helena represents blind, romantic obsession. Most of the time we gain information about Helena from her own words and actions and the ways in which she interacts with and is discussed by other characters. Hermia and Helena are young, innocent females in love. She feels insecure about her looks and her jealousy towards her friend Hermia who has unwillingly stolen the affection of Demetrius from her.

On the surface, Helena doesn't fit well into today's ideals of a strong, independent woman.

Titania:

Titania is Queen of the Fairies, wife of Oberon. She is always surrounded by her fairies. When we meet her she's a gracious queen with proud. She is really most powerful woman in the play. She is a portrayal of a strong woman. She also reveals a compassionate and loyal nature by adopting the son of an Indian woman whom she has befriended over the years. Titania is also so confident, she simply refuses to live with Oberon unless he changes his mind. There is a conflict which Shakespeare reveals is a sense of jealousy between the two fairies. Titania is strong-willed, intelligent, daring and powerful woman in the play. She is characterized by being a dominating figure and a strong woman. She keeps an authoritative attitude.

In the beginning of the play, the biggest difference we see between the two female characters, Hermia and Helena is that one is confident while the other lacks confidence. Hermia is a bold, confident woman because she is loved by the man she loves; in contrast Helena not only lacks confidence, but often acts in desperation because the man she loves has suddenly rejected her. We especially see Hermia's confidence and boldness in the very first scene. We even see her apologize for her boldness later. Hermia is conscientious enough of what virtue requires and confident enough of Lysander's love to reject his request and tell him to '[I]e further off'(II.ii45). However, if Helena were in Hermia's same shoes, she might be

so desperate for love that she would threaten her virtue. We see Helena's lack of confidence and desperation in the very first scene. When Hermia addresses her best friend as "fair", Helena's response is to pout and ask how she could be called fair when Demetrius loves Hermia's fairness, not her own, as we see in her lines, "call you me fair? That fair again unsay. /Demetrius loves your fair. O happy fair!" (I.i.184-185). In fact Helena is so enamored of a man who has broken her heart that she makes the decision to tell him Hermia's and Lysander's plans to run away, even though she will probably get no other reward for it than simple thanks. Helena is so desperate for his love that she even runs after him into the woods, which endangers her maiden chastity, as Demetrius points out himself:

You do impeach your  
Modesty too much  
To leave the city and commit  
Yourself  
Into the hands of one that  
Loves you not. (II.i.218-220)

Hence, we see that the greatest difference between the two women is that one is confident and bold because she is loved by the man who loves her, while the other lacks confidence and is desperate. HERMIA and Helena have known each other since childhood and have been friends ever since.

In these observations, it has become obvious that Hermia and Helena in A Midsummer Night's Dream are expected to subject themselves to male authority. Helena especially, fulfills the role of the dependent, obedient woman who does not have a will of her own and humiliates herself just for the

sake of male attention. We cannot assume that social roles are the reason for everything that happens between the major characters of the play as Helena's jealousy and insecurity are natural, quite powerful human emotions that have nothing to do with gender roles. Shakespeare may be suggesting that subjection and insecurity both cause many problems which women may not be able to solve. Helena chases after men. This is very opposing to how a typical woman should act. "We cannot fight for love, as men may do. We should be woo'd and were not make to woo." She contracts her gender by breaking society's rules. Women are not to chase after men. They are to obey their fathers and the man they choose for them. Helena is hypocrite when she turns around and questions Hermia's beauty as a friend. This is going against the Athenian society rules on how to act like a woman. Hermia disobeys her father, Egeus and is stubborn on her decision on who to marry. Women are supposed to obey their father's commands and respect them. To not to do so results in severe consequences such as death. However Hermia did the opposite and rebelled against the Athenian society. Hermia runs away with Lysander who is neither her legally husband or fiancé but a mere stranger. This action is disapproved by the society. This is proven when Hermia expresses the importance of Lysander sleeping far away. Women are supposed to look pure. But by doing this it causes Hermia to look otherwise. She speaks back to the king. Women do not speak out loud or question authoritative figures like men and especially kings. She does not listen or obey the king

as a proper Athenian should. Hippolyta pretends to love king Theseus and thus lies throughout the play. She is forced to marry the king when he attacks her kingdom. Deception is against the etiquettes and guidelines of how a submissive should act. A woman shall answer honestly to her man. This goes against the image of an Athenian woman especially a Queen, as Queens are supposed to be the role models for the females of the kingdom. She is dominant in her relationship with king Theseus. This is very unusual and not right according to the Athenian laws. She goes against the social etiquettes and develops a different role in her relationship.

#### **Conclusion:**

Most literary and historical scholars affirms that women did not enjoy political, economic. or social parity with men during Shakespeare's time and this historical reality is important to keep in mind when analyzing the variety of female characters in the plays of Shakespeare. His many female characters exercise subtle forms of power and

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influence. This is one of the Shakespearean plays where the presentation of women is not too flattering, compared to other heroines such as Portia or Rosalind, who clearly have a valid and vibrant existence of their own dependent of men and are praised by feminists for the kind of powerful female role model they present. In this play, women are presented in a more traditional and conventional fashion, highlighting their dependence upon men. They are presented as rather being in the shadow of men. Even Titania and Hippolyta, who are often played by the same character, and by the end of the play are conventional female figures, loving and submissive wives. Helena and Hermia are definitely no better both are presented as almost being slaves to the love. Shakespeare sees women as very dependent people. Throughout his works, women are portrayed very vital to the success of the play. He portrays them in such a way that they seem weak, but at the same time they make the men crazy, and act in very outrageous manners.