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Is there love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

After first seeing a performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I would have called it a love story. After reading it several times, I am less sure what it is. I will take a closer look at the behavior and context of the characters to understand how a comedy with three marriages and as many as seven lovers almost concludes without a portrayal of love that satisfies me. The pairings I consider are: Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Helena and Hermia, Titania and Oberon, Titania and Bottom, and Pyramus and Thisby.

Theseus and Hippolyta's relationship is the most dignified in the play. They show a desire to get along and they are comfortable sharing experiences and feelings important to them (1.1.1-11; 4.1.111-126). Theseus tenderly dominates Hippolyta: "Come, my Hippolyta. What cheer, my love?" (1.1.122; 4.1.185). Hippolyta however never reciprocates his use of terms of endearment such as "my love" and "fair queen." In addition, the mythical context of their relationship is foreboding. We are reminded that Theseus is able to marry Hippolyta because he kidnapped her (1.1.16-1.1.19). The mythical Hippolyta later either dies in childbirth, or fighting against the Amazons by Theseus's side, or Theseus leaves her for another woman, Phaedra, and the story

gets more sordid after that.¹ Theseus's reputation as ravisher of women is addressed in the script (2.1.74-80). And the Amazon method of perpetuating their tribe is not romantic.²

Our perception of Lysander and Hermia's love develops in the following events: Hermia chooses to become a nun rather than submit to marrying the man her father has chosen for her; Lysander comforts Hermia and shares his plan to elope; They lose their way in the woods and negotiate sleeping arrangements; Lysander deserts Hermia to pursue Helena and to kill his rival, Demetrius.

While the initial event establishes a traditional love-story scenario, departures from a Cinderella and Prince Charming characterization occur: Hermia responds disrespectfully to the Duke (1.1.53) and Lysander makes a scornful remark to Demetrius and Egeus (1.1.93-94).

When Lysander comforts Hermia and they plan to elope, they show they are well-versed in the nature of mythical love (1.1.132-155). That they have this level of awareness contrasts painfully or comically with their later lack of self-possession. The exuberance of their rhetoric contrasts with the gravity of their situation, and I cannot conceive of these lines being performed in a way that could evoke deep feeling. I have the impression they are breathlessly playing at love. Hermia's vow to meet in the woods the following night emphasizes her awareness of epic and general male infidelity (1.1.173-178). This could be performed as expressing doubt or as being endearingly playful (Brooks cxxx).

When they are lost in the woods, Lysander's verse in his attempt to sleep with Hermia

¹ Hippolytus was Theseus's son by Hippolyta. Perhaps due to Hippolytus scorning Aphrodite, Aphrodite causes Phaedra to lust for Hippolytus, who spurns Phaedra. In revenge, Phaedra tells Theseus that Hippolytus raped her. Theseus then causes Hippolytus to be killed. ("Phaedra")

² "Once a year, in order to prevent their race from dying out, they visited the Gargareans, a neighboring [all male] tribe. The children who were the result of these visits were either put to death or sent back to their fathers; the females were kept and brought up by their mothers." ("Amazons")

(2.2.45-52) can emphasize the simple lust that motivates Lysander and how well Hermia manages him knowing she must maintain propriety and preserve virginity, or it could be played as the essence of young lovers' tender love (Brooks cxxx).

While we can write it off to bewitching, Lysander's rationalization of his sudden change of heart (2.2.103-107) suggests he is at least as occupied with killing his rival as he is with Helena's bosom. Hermia's waking from a dream in which a serpent was eating her heart as Lysander smiled and her reaction to Lysander's disappearance (2.2.145-156) can emphasize fear of desertion and desire to have Lysander protect her over concern for his well-being. Hermia later shows the full force of her wrath and her shrewish potential when she accosts Demetrius and must be restrained from clawing Helena. While we might expect a few edges to the character of a realistic Cinderella, Hermia exceeds the mark.

Helena and Demetrius are from the outset a problem couple. It was the incongruity of Helena's calling herself a lover even while decimating the concept of true love (1.1.232-245) and repeatedly and reflexively claiming the role of a victim that first prodded me to look further into the nature of other characters' love behavior. Helena's description of Demetrius's earlier change of heart (1.1.249-252) suggests love potion is not necessary to effect the lack of constancy we later see. And when Demetrius does express love for Helena (3.2.137-144), he becomes nearly indistinguishable from Lysander except for the poorer quality of his verse.

Helena's first speech to Hermia (1.1.181-1.1.193), however, captures something of the ineffability of what it is that makes someone seem beautiful. Helena emphasizes appearance, perhaps excessively, but her Hermia's beauty is due to Hermia's whole way of being. Parts of this speech can be read as a love poem to Hermia (1.1.183-185). Helena's later description of her childhood relationship with Hermia (3.2.198-214) presents the fullest and most pure picture of love in the play. Imagery and verse similar to this was used in that great sisterly love poem,

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market."

Titania and Oberon's union suggests a business endeavor or political alliance where the presence of love is immaterial. "Amity" (4.1.86) is the desired state. They have a disagreement and neither will compromise. Titania's description of the woes caused by their feuding (2.1.82-2.1.117) remind us it is part of their profession as Fairy Queen and King to be at least on good enough terms to dance with each other regularly. Titania shows more self-awareness, self-control, and experience dealing with quarrels than the younger lovers do. She de-escalates the confrontation with "These are the forgeries of jealousy" (2.1.81) and ends it with "Fairies, away! We shall chide downright if I longer stay" (2.1.144-145). One can also read haughtiness into her act. Oberon succeeds in getting both what he wanted plus revenge, and Titania seems to forget the original reason for their falling out.

Titania's behavior toward Bottom is the inverse of Helena's with respect to Demetrius: she calls Bottom her lover without any sort of lovemaking on his part; she is firmly in control: "Out of this wood do not desire to go. [...] And I do love thee. Therefore go with me" (3.1.145-149), and "Tie up my lover's tongue, bring him silently" (3.1.195); and she is not entirely happy with Bottom as he is: "And I will purge thy mortal grossness so / That thou shalt like an airy spirit go" (3.1.153-154). Sexy, savvy, and powerful Titania does not have to lament enforced chastity—she can have whomever she wants when she wants. If this dynamic were between a powerful male and a lover it would be less fantastic.

As for Pyramus and Thisby, while Bottom's portrayal of Quince's Pyramus is too ridiculous to evoke a serious feeling, Thisby is another matter. She behaves throughout like a faithful, pure true love should, even to her death. In fact, we can compare Thisby and Hermia's behavior both in swearing to meet their lovers outside of town and in finding their lovers dead or absent. Any humor in her remarks is not the fault of her character.

There is love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and there is even a fragment I'm able to imagine as true love, but my hesitance to label it a love story is justified. Initially I thought Shakespeare might be multiplexing an exposition of all the non-love-based reasons males and females pair up onto a surface plot he knew would be taken by the casual theatergoer to be a happily-ever-after love story.³ However, the interpretation of the play as having been developed and first performed for a wedding ceremony in a noble household (Brooks liii) with a central theme of love and marriage (Brooks cxxx-cxliii) fits better. It accounts for attributes of the drama ranging from the death in childbirth of the parent of the changeling child (2.1.135) to the honoring of a virgin imperial votaress (2.1.164) to the enumeration and portrayal of the aberrations of love on which my thesis focused. Brooks views the play as a celebration and blessing of one kind of love and marriage experience with recognition, and in some cases, exorcism, of alternate possibilities (cxxxii-cxxxv).

There are other aspects to my perception of a lack of satisfying love in the play. I initially adopted a perspective that Shakespeare was expressing cynicism about love and I neglected to consider alternative possibilities. My interpretation of the characters said more about me than it did about Shakespeare (Bloom 15). I was also influenced to look at the characters in a particular way by the performance of the play I had seen (Hoffman) and the reading it was given in class.

³Critic René Girard suggests Shakespeare is demonstrating the power myths have over our perception of reality:

Shakespeare is making fun of us, of course. He seems intent on proving that you can say almost anything in a play as long as you provide the audience with the habitual props of comedy, the conventional expressions of "true love," even in minimal amounts [...]. As long as the standard plot is vaguely outlined, even in the crudest and least believable fashion, the author can subvert his own myths and state the truth at every turn, with no consequences whatsoever. The audience will instinctively and automatically rally around the old clichés, so completely blind and deaf to everything which may contradict them that the presence of this truth will not even be noticed. The continued misunderstanding of the play throughout the centuries gives added resonance to the point Shakespeare is secretly making, providing ironic confirmation that the most worn-out myth will always triumph over the most explicit demythification. (232)

Brooks's introduction suggested other readings and provides texts that Shakespeare may have based his characters on that told a different story than the one I had been reading.⁴

Also, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reminds us that what passed for a happy heterosexual love relationship in Elizabethan times was female submission to a wealthy male in a coupling fitting the social status of both partners. Emphasis on female submission is not consistent with many modern notions of love.

The fragment I was able to perceive as true romantic love had the least developed characters. The reason the old myths and fairy tales continue to work today as representations of true love may be that they present so general a framework of interactions that whether our concept of a good relationship is Elizabethan or something else, nothing in the mythical characterization contradicts our ideal image of love.

⁴ For example, Shakespeare's portrayal of Helena's pursuit of Demetrius appears to be based on Phaedra's pursuit of Hippolytus as described in Seneca's *Hippolytus* (Brooks, lxiii).

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