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Law And Love In The Athens And The Fairy Land Of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

Love and in relation to it law are among the central motifs of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Their significance comes to the fore especially when they are symbiotically investigated in the context of the Athenian society and the realm of the fairies. The playwright offers a solution to the amatory problems resulting from the strictures of Athenian law. Engendering an aura of the Carnavalesque, the writer has the love tensions resolved by taking the pairs of Athenian lovers to a fairy landscape where the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe is to be staged; from this vantage point, the play might be viewed as a mirror held up to rulers, suggesting the possible tragic consequences of strict adherence to traditional strict laws.

Keywords: Law; Love; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Carnival.

Introduction

The motifs of love and law in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been much debated. Yet their symbiotic relationship in the context of Athenian society and the realm of the faeries has been less critically appreciated. As Herman¹ points out, Shakespeare's scholarship has focused on such issues as love and gender relations, the role of the mechanicals, and the significance of the play in the Elizabethan era. Concerning the issue of law, Herman writes, many scholars have more touched upon Shakespeare's plays *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello* rather than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; even in discussing the character of Theseus, Herman notes, critics have addressed his problematic erotic relations rather than his position as Athens' ruler and his relationship to its law. This study aims to bring to spotlight the symbiotic relationship between the realm of the fairies and that of Athenian society for discussing the motifs of law and love in the play; it is argued that that the green world of Shakespeare's fairies acts as an imaginative space for resolving the tensions arising from love issues, with regard to the strict laws and norms of Athens. In the first section of this article, the nature of Athenian law and its strictures concerning nuptial customs are explored. The second part of this article draws upon the significance of the land of fairies in relation to Athenian lovers. Finally, the conclusion of the article is offered, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between the two realms of the play.

¹ Peter C. Herman, "Equity and the Problem of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Or, the Ancient Constitution in Ancient Athens," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 4-5.

1. Athenian Law and Lovers

"While the total number of lines explicitly devoted to the question of law may be small, they are crucial to the meaning, direction, and action of Shakespeare's comedy,"² Herman writes about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare sets the play in pre-Christian Athens, "a city commonly associated almost as much as ancient Rome in the early modern political imaginary with republicanism, which implies a polity governed by law rather than the ruler's will."³ It has been argued that the play was occasioned for the solemn nuptials of a noble family, possibly for that of the Earl of Derby or the Earl of Essex.⁴ In harmony with the idea of court marriage, the play centers on the topic of love; but the motif of love as distinct from reason becomes a lens through which the writer explores issues important to the political climax of the early modern period. As Siegel observes, "Shakespeare, writing not only for all time but for the occasion, played upon this awareness, exploiting to the full the theatrical potentialities of a situation in which the audience saw on the stage an enactment of the circumstances in which it was at the same time participating in life."⁵

The play opens with the speech of Theseus, duke of Athens, addressing Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Waiting impatiently for their nuptial ceremony, he says:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
 Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
 Another moon; but, oh, methinks, how slow
 This old moon wanes! she lingers my desires,
 Like to a step-dame or a dowager,
 Long withering out a young man's revenue (I. i. 1-6)⁶.

Theseus then commands his master of revels Philostrate to "stir up the Athenian youth to merriments" and "awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth" (I. i. 12-13). No sooner is the speech of Theseus uttered than the Athenian citizen Egeus, his daughter Hermia, Lysander, and Demetrius appear on the stage. Egeus attempts to prevent her daughter Hermia from marrying Lysander, with whom she is in love. She resists her father's command that she marry Demetrius. Then the motif of Athenian law is introduced. Storming onto the scene, Egeus, who is "full of vexation" (I. i. 22), complains that Lysander "hath bewitched the bosom" (I. i. 27) of her daughter and demands that Theseus enforce the law which abides a daughter to his father's consent regarding her marriage:

And, my gracious duke,
 Be it so she will not, here before your grace,
 Consent to marry with Demetrius,
 I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:
 As she is mine I may dispose of her –
 Which shall be either to this gentleman
 Or to her death, according to our law
 Immediately provided in that case. (I. i. 38-45)

Theseus reminds Hermia of the relationship between a father and his daughter according to the Athenian law:

To you your father should be as a god,
 One that composed your beauties; yea, and one
 To whom you are but as a form in wax

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Paul A. Olson "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Meaning of Court Marriage," *ELH* 24, no. 2 (1957): 95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2871824>.

⁵ Paul N. Siegel, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Wedding Guests." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1953): 139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2866169>.

⁶ All references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from: Shakespeare, William. "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In *Shakespeare's Complete Works*, edited by W. J. Creig. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966)

By him imprinted, and within his power
 To leave the figure, or disfigure it. (I. i. 47–51)
 Theseus then offers Hermia another choice:
 Either to die the death, or to abjure
 Forever the society of men.

Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,
 Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
 Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice. (I. i. 65–69)

Hermia should either remain single and chaste like a nun or have death as punishment. However she and Lysander both refute the authority of the Athenian law and plan secretly to escape into the forest for Lysander's aunt's house. Hermia informs Helena, her best friend, about their plan. The next section of the play is mainly concerned with the adventures of the four lovers in the green land of the fairies.

2. The Land of the Fairies and Athenian Lovers

The Renaissance experienced a world in which "spirits both malign and benign occupied a real and significant position."⁷ The fairies of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have the ability to extend their power into the workings of nature and to effect changes in the human spirit. As Miller notes, the complex and comprehensive intellectuality of Shakespeare's art of comedy was never better revealed than by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and, in particular, by his use of the fairies in this play. "Not only are they obviously the most striking feature of the comedy; intellectually they are the most provocative, too."⁸ In the second act of the play, the reader is taken into the world of faeries. The omnipresence of the fairies is suggested by the fairy first seen by Puck:

PUCK. How now, spirit! whither wander you?
 Fairy. Over hill, over dale,
 Thorough bush, thorough brier,
 Over park, over pale,
 Thorough flood, thorough fire,
 I do wander everywhere,
 Swifter than the moon's sphere;
 And I serve the fairy queen (2.1.1–8)

In contrast to the Athenian world which with its strict laws imposes limitation on young lovers, the fairies' world is characterized by a degree of liberation. The fairies wander everywhere and the whole natural world is under their domain. This is suggested in terms of the dissension arising between Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairy world, respectively. The cause of their contention is a changeling boy, possessed by Titania but desired by Oberon who aims at making him one of his knights. Their dissension has led to climate change, bad weather, and much catastrophe. Accusing Oberon of jealousy, Titania says:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
 As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea
 Contagious fogs, which falling in the land
 Have every pelting river made so proud
 That they have overborne their continents ...
 The spring, the summer,
 The childing autumn, angry winter, change
 Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,
 By their increase, now knows not which is which.
 And this same progeny of evils comes

⁷ Jerome Mandel, "Dream and Imagination in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1973): 63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2868739>.

⁸ Ronald F. Miller, "A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Fairies, Bottom, and the Mystery of Things." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1975): 254. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2869606>.

From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original. (2.1.111–17)

Sidney Thomas has highlighted "the topical reference"⁹ of Titania's speech with the famous period of bad-weather in England. Nevertheless, Titania's words suggest the potentiality of fairies to effect change in the whole universe and bring about chaos. However, the fairies should not be viewed in a negative light as the causes of chaos and discord; their function is largely to evoke harmony and a dreamlike atmosphere.

Dreams are of great significance in Shakespeare's plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as vividly highlighted by its title, the play is communicated as a dream to the audience; it is a midsummer night's dream, a time suitable for the occurrence of supernatural and macabre experiences. Francois Laroque refers to the symbolic overtones of a midsummer night's dream as follows:

In popular memories, Midsummer was still linked to the London parades. The famous Midsummer Watch, suppressed in 1539, was replaced by the Lord Mayor's Show on St. Simon and St. Jude's Day on 28 October, usually staged at nightfall with torches, with the presence of St. George and the dragon (popularly referred to as "Old Snap"), of giants and of Wild Men ("woodwoses"), all equipped with candles, lanterns, or "cressets." These figures created a very special tinge of delight and fear, analogous to the ambivalent reactions prompted on contemporary English stages by fairies' magic as well as by demonic or ghostly apparitions¹⁰.

As stated, the fairies of the play are not just the source of discord. To a great extent, they contribute to the sense of harmony, evoked by solving the amatory problems of Athenian lovers. In the course of his contention with Titania over the changeling boy, Oberon, helped by his servant Puck, has a flower of the purple color, hit with an arrow of Cupid's arrows. He squeezes its magical love juice into Titania's eyes and consequently she is enamored with the ass-headed Bottom, one of the rude mechanicals. Likewise, overhearing the dialogue between Helena and Demetrius, Oberon asks Puck to apply the flower juice to end their argument. The flower's juice, mistakenly applied on Lysander's eyes, leads to the confusion among the pair of lovers. Finally, this confusion is ended and there is order and harmony instead:

Jacke shall have Jill;
Nought shall goe ill

The man shall have his mare again, And all shall be well. (3.2.461–4)

Therefore, the magic flower, or in Mebane's words the "supernatural machinery"¹¹ used by Puck, enhances the dreamlike atmosphere of the play in relation to the motif of love.

Concerning the theme of love, Hutton observes that for many critics the choice offered by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is "either between the rational and the irrational or between reason and the imagination. For those stressing the theme of love, rational love is said to triumph over irrational love as the young lovers, after their night of irrationality, return to the bonds of rational love and marriage exemplified by Theseus and Hippolyta."¹² Fisher sees the issue from a broader perspective. In his view, "The play itself continues to impress both audience and reader as high fantasy."¹³ In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he argues, the comic problem contains four lovers

⁹ Sidney Thomas, "The Bad Weather in a Midsummer-Night's Dream." *Modern Language Notes* 64, no. 5 (1949): 319. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2909905>.

¹⁰ Francois Laroque, "Popular Festivity": 71; in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, edited by Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹¹ John S. Mebane, "Structure, Source, and Meaning in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 24, no. 3 (1982): 260. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754686>.

¹² Virgil Hutton, "A Midsummer Night's Dream: Tragedy in Comic Disguise." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25, no. 2 (1985): 290. <https://doi.org/10.2307/450724>.

¹³ Peter F. Fisher, "The Argument of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1957): 307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2866990>.

who represent the irrational force of sublunary love, opposed to "the rationally ordered world of the Athenian court in the heroic age of Theseus."¹⁴ "This conflict has two extremes: the earthy and grotesquely matter-of-fact world of Bottom, and the ecstatic and fantastic world of Oberon,"¹⁵ he adds. There is in the play a correspondence between the Athenian characters, notably Theseus and his betrothed queen Hippolyta, and their fairy counterparts Oberon and Titania. Both are the rulers of their unique world and attempt to establish order and harmony in their realm. There is also parallelism between the legal conflict between Egeus and his daughter, and that of Oberon and Titania over the changeling boy. In handling the motif love and law, the poet, therefore draws upon the realm of the fairies and that of Athenian society. Nevertheless, the two realms are in close relationship with each other. On the one hand, the play's faery world might be viewed as a product of the poet's imagination. As Theseus maintains:

The Poets eye, in a fine frenzy, rolling, doth glance
From heauen to earth, from earth to heauen.
And as Imagination bodies forth the formes of things
Unknowne: the Poets penne turnes them to shapes,
And giues to ayery nothing, a locall habitation,
And a name. (V. i. 12-17).

On the other, the fairy world and its fantastical creatures are not an end in themselves. "Be it remembered, moreover, how the fairies dominate the play; and how constantly and intimately fairies were associated with weddings by our Elizabethan ancestors, their genial favours invoked, their possible malign caprices prayed against,"¹⁶ observe the editors of the New Cambridge Shakespeare. In the same vein, commenting on the nature of fairies and their function in the play, Mebane has argued that in one aspect, the fairies are toys, as Theseus suggests in the play; "they are a delightfully playful means of suggesting a highly significant level of meaning."¹⁷ Moreover, the fairies are integral to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the play.

As a text, the play was "historically part of an aristocratic carnival,"¹⁸ Wile notes. "It was written for a wedding, and part of the festive structure of the wedding night. The audience who saw the play in the public theatre in the months that followed became vicarious participants in an aristocratic festival from which they were physically excluded"¹⁹ The carnival plot of the play takes an aura of merriment and festivity and provides an opportunity for evading official law and culture. It is populated by characters, such as dukes and queens, incompetent and amateur actors from the working class called mechanicals, Athenian lovers, and the faeries of the forest, from different social walks and even from different realms. It provides a context subverting or evading the strictures of Athenian law. Therefore the realm of the fairies and that of Athens have a symbiotic relationship together. Shakespeare's play has also political dimensions. By setting the play in ancient Athens, introducing legal issues and love problems, and taking the characters to the land of fairies, Shakespeare has his play staged as a mirror held up to the contemporary rulers. The tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe as a play-within-the play is meaningful in these terms. The writer highlights the tragic consequences of adhering to traditional customs in relation to amatory issues. Concerning the fantastical incidents of the fairy world, the readers may choose to believe or not believe them. In this regard, Puck's suggestion of thinking of the play as a dream implies that one may take it as an imaginative possibility, at least:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb'ed here

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Paul N. Siegel, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Wedding Guests," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1953): 139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2866169>.

¹⁷ John S. Mebane, "Structure, Source, and Meaning in A Midsummer Night's Dream," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 24, no. 3 (1982): 261. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754686>.

¹⁸ David Wiles, "The Carnavalesque in A Midsummer Night's Dream": 67; in Ronald Knowles, ed., *Shakespeare and Carnival* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998).

¹⁹ Ibid.

While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,
 Gentles, do not reprehend.
 If you pardon, we will mend. (V, i, 423-30)

Finally, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Mebane puts it, "suggests that awareness of life's beauty and value is derived not from reason, which is a limited faculty, but from imagination and intuition. The play conveys a sense of wonder and astonishment at the blessings of life, and it is this emphasis, at least as much as the themes of imagination or appearance and reality, which associates the play's vision of love and harmony with dreams."²⁰ Therefore, the motifs of law and love are understandable in the context of both the real world of Athens and, the imaginative and dreamlike atmosphere of the land of fairies.

Conclusion

Love and, in tandem with it, law are among the main motifs of Shakespeare's romantic comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play centers on the wedding on the duke of Athens Theseus and his betrothed queen Hippolyta; it functions as a prologue for the issue of love in relation to the tensions between the two pairs of Athenian lovers. Egeus who is a godlike figure contends that his daughter should not marry Lysander, with whom she is desperately in love; in another amorous situation, Hermia's friend Helena is in love with Demetrius, who is in love with Hermia.

According to the strictures of Athenian law, Hermia should either marry Demetrius, as her father demands, or remain chaste like a nun. The issue is resolved by playwright having the couple escape into the green forest of the land of faeries, where it is not subject to the Athenian laws.

The fairy landscape of the play in a Carnavalesque fashion brings together characters from various social walks interacting with the fairies of the forest. Corresponding with the contention between Athenian lovers, there is a minor contention between the king and queen of the fairies Oberon and Titania over a changeling boy. The dreamlike aura of the land of fairies provides an opportunity for resolving amatory problems. From this vantage point, the play serves as a mirror held up to princes; it offers an advice to the rulers regarding the possibilities of bypassing the strictures of cultural traditions which by law cannot be transgressed. Thus, love and law find a symbiotic relationship in the play.

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²⁰ John S. Mebane, "Structure, Source, and Meaning in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 24, no. 3 (1982): 257–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754686>.

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