

**The Theme of Love in Shakespeare's
*A Midsummer Night's Dream***

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Abstract

A Midsummer Night's Dream was written about 1595 as an entertainment at the marriage of some great nobleman, and was later performed in the public theatre. In this play, the audience will not be surprised that Shakespeare should return to the theme of love; love is indeed the great, perhaps the supreme reality in our lives.

The present study is divided into four sections and a conclusion. Section One presents a general idea about the theme of love in the play. Section Two sheds light on love's difficulty and love's madness. Love and reason will be explained in section Three, with special attention on the close relation between love and sex. The last section shows the importance of magic and its effect on the lovers in the forest.

Then , follows the conclusion which sums up the findings of the research.

I

1.1 The Theme of Love in A Midsummer Night's Dream

As far as the theme of love is concerned, Shakespeare always insists on the triumph of Love – because it is more impressive and powerful than death. His plays show the most effective love passages ever written. Also in his earliest tragic play Romeo and Juliet, one can see cruel fate working against the lovers till they

come down to death, though they are lovable and innocent. It is easy to notice in Antony and Cleopatra a frankly sensual love; a love of hot human passions with defiance of morality and the rights of others. That is deadly love, which brings Antony and his Egyptian queen to disaster.¹

In A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and The Merchant of Venice, the readers find such type of love as in Antony and Cleopatra. One can see estimable people for whom the course of true love does not run smooth, but by courage and pluck on the part of a fine woman character, things come to happy endings.²

In Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night's Dream, one of the main reoccurring themes is love. Shakespeare deals with the theme of love that is passionate and impulsive, or sensible and reasonable. The theme of this play is that love is blind, unreasonable, unpredictable, inconsistent, that all is fair in love. Moreover, the theme here is neither realistic nor tragic, but it is an entertainment fantasy. One should find that its romantic moments themselves made fun of, reflecting in the distorting mirror of farce.³

All the events of the characters in the play which are done by Theseus and Hippolyta, the four young lovers, the exquisite, delicate, non-quite-human fairies (Robin Hood fellow expected), and the low comedians, are related to the theme of love. Thus, the whole play is like a piece of music in which a single motif is repeated in different keys and tempos. Or they are as a network of parallel, circling, or crisscrossing threads which somehow form a satisfying pattern.⁴

The characters in this play, Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons who are about to be married, are presented as model lovers, model rulers, setting an example of wise and fine behaviour to all their people. They are not young, and

excitable, like the four lovers; they have lived through many experiences before the time comes for them to marry. Theseus, though he loves Hippolyta and will wed her in another key, has won her love doing her injuries.⁵

Hermia the daughter of Egeus, falls in love with Lysander. She wants to marry him, but her father refuses because he wants her to marry Demetrius. At the same time, Hermia refuses her father's will because she loves Lysander so much. So, Hermia, for the love of Lysander, defies her father and Athenian law.⁶

In fact Shakespeare has a good example of real love in the play: Hermia and Lysander. Their love is pure and simple. They have no reason to be in love with each other; yet, they have hopelessly fallen so. This is Shakespeare's symbol of ultimate innocence. However, often with innocence comes abuse of that quality, as in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Egeus, Hermia's father, feels that Hermia is too innocent to choose her own husband, and that it is his duty to choose one for her. Although he is only doing this to protect her, it shows his opinion of Hermia's incompetence.⁷

Demetrius also, who wishes to marry Hermia, has broken his earlier promise to marry Helena, Hermia's friend since their school days, who still loves him. Demetrius makes vows of love to Helena and then to Hermia. Hermia wooed by two young men who in the eyes of the world are indistinguishably handsome, rich, and well-born, dotes upon one and hardly knows that the other exists.⁸

When the four lovers, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, come to the wood, their story reached its end and their love problems resolve in the place, where they are submitted to Puck, a spirit who likes to play tricks on people. Puck puts a drop of magic juice in the eyes of a sleeping person. Then his behaviour changes and there are some very complicated misunderstandings brought about. And when the sun rises, everything comes to its end, and that

all is well again, Lysander and Hermia are united in love, and so are Demetrius and Helena.

The love of Duke Theseus and Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has nothing fiery. He has shown his wild oats and had many love affairs, perhaps his final union with Hippolyta is something without the upsetting fire of passion, almost a marriage of intellectual sympathy. Thus, one can notice in the play that he does nothing and that nothing happens to him. Next, the audience meet two pairs of young lovers whose affairs present a little complication, the contemplated flight of Lysander and Hermia. Though their love is true love, but is not a heart-shaking affair, it is an ordinary elopement such as what might happen in any country or at any time. One can say that there is nothing very serious about such a situation, which is common enough in everyday life.⁹

The love between Lysander and Hermia is true love and this is quite evident in the play. The young love of the people is far more powerful than one thinks. At the end true love will prevail no matter what gets in the way. Hermia and Lysander are the two lovers where nothing goes their way. Their love is so strong that nothing shall get in the way of true love. Hermia is faced with a decision to marry Demetrius, the man she does not love, or be faced with death. The father of Hermia is the one setting up the marriage between the two. Their love is so strong that they will let nothing stop them. So they run away together into the woods. This truly is a sign of true love. These two young lovers are willing to risk everything for love.

Then Helena portrays the sort of crazy girl who will stop at nothing to win the heart of Demetrius even if it means hurting the others around her. The only problem is that Demetrius is supposed to marry Hermia. And this starts the endless struggle of love, so off into the woods Lysander and Hermia together, then Demetrius

would want Helena and he really wants Helena after that night in the woods. Under the influence of magic, Demetrius walks up to see Helena, whom he has scorned before. He at once told her:

*O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine,
To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?
Crystal is mudd. O, how ripe in show
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting
grow!**

(III, ii, 137-40)

This is an evidence about this change and his love to Helena. But this change is a result of magic, love potion.

In his book about Shakespeare: Text and Context, Ryan states:

When we remember that his love to her is the result of being under a magic spell woven in the 'dream'. If you are going to argue that Lysander was merely deluded when he fell for Helena, being a victim of the love-juice applied by Puck then you have to admit that Demetrius' love for his wife-to-be is founded on illusion, as is the newly restored harmony among the quarter.¹⁰

* William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. W. Turner (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co (Pvt.) LTD., ND). All other quotations of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from this edition and henceforth are parenthetically cited within the text by act, scene, and line.

II

2.1 Love's Difficulty

In this play, and in other Shakespeare's romantic plays whether tragic or comic plays, the love affair is not easy, but it is difficult. One can see in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the theme of love (Love's difficulty). Lysander comments, "*The course of true love never did run smooth.*" (I, i,134), articulating one of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* most important themes which is the difficulty of love. Although most of the conflict in the play is the result of the troubles of romance, and though a number of romantic elements includes in the play, it is not truly a love story; it distances the audience from the emotions of the characters in order to poke fun at the torments and afflictions that those in love suffer. The play has so light hearted tone that the audience never doubt that things will end happily. Therefore, it is free to enjoy the comedy without catching up in the tension of an uncertain outcome.¹¹

The theme of love's difficulty is so often explored through the motif of love out of balance-that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship. The prime instance of this imbalance is the asymmetrical love among the four young Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius and Demetrius loves Hermia instead of Helena-a simple numeric imbalance in which two men love the same woman , leaving one woman with too many suitors and one with too few. The play has strong potential for a traditional outcome, and the plot is in many ways based on a quest for

internal balance; that is, when the lovers' triangle resolves itself into symmetrical pairings the traditional happy ending will have been achieved. Somewhat similarly, in the relation between Titania and Oberon, an imbalance arises out of the fact that Oberon's coveting of Titania's Indian by outweighing his love for her. Later, Titania's passion for the ass-headed Bottom represents an imbalance of appearance and nature: Titania is beautiful and graceful, while Bottom is clumsy and grotesque.¹²

2.2 Love's Madness

Shakespeare wrote this play when he was young, when he was still taking a light and care-free view of life. So this play is related to his early period. The youth who has not felt the thrills and heart-shaking of a love affair looks with wonder on the erratic behaviour of those around him who are lovers. From this point it becomes clear that there is a mild reaction to madness in such erratic loves, which can be formed in a moment and changed to another object at short notice. According to Shakespeare, it is a wild form of madness, and only real experience will change that estimation. The aspect of love that one finds in A Midsummer Night's Dream is that apparent to the untouched looker-on, who is heart-whole and can afford to jest at the victims of winged Cupid. While in his later plays he described the more serious side of love, its power to elevate to the heavens or bring down to the blackness of the pit.¹³

Love-madness is the central theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is this which ties together various sections of the play, from Demetrius' transfers of affection, from Helena to Hermia and then back to Helena, to Titania's temporary love for Bottom. This is really madness of love. The theme has both a prologue and an epilogue, in each of which it receives a generalized formation. The epilogue is found in Helena's soliloquy in Act I, the epilogue in Theseus' speech on the lunatic, the lover, and the poet in Act V.

*How happy some o'er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know:
And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes,
So I, admiring of his qualities:
Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement haste;
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy taste:
And therefore is Love said to be a child
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.*

(I, i, 226-39)

The love described here is cut off both from the evidence of the senses, and from the corrective power of judgment. It is purely a creature of the imagination, a kind of madness, in which the victim may be intellectually aware of his illusion but unable to resist it.

Shakespeare, in this play, tells a tale of quarrelling between lovers, Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia, companions, Oberon, and Titania friends (the players), and the wedding planners

(Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus). These quarrels, which are subplots, develop the theme Shakespeare's plays before the audience.

Through the adventures the characters experience, common theme is set among all the parties in the play. The theme is the understanding of the importance of coming together which results from the theme of love's madness. Without love, they will never be united and come together.

In the woods live the fairies. Their king and queen, Oberon and Titania have quarreled because of a lovely boy stolen from an Indian king, as a result the weather is upset and the crops are spoiled. Oberon calls Puck to make the love potion in order to punish Titania. Puck's mistake leads to misunderstanding, but when the sun rises the lovers are united and everything comes to its well end. Theseus quarrels lead to unity and love.¹⁴

III

3.1 Love and Reason

In Act III, Bottom, a crude commoner states an opinion of love, *“and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep/ a little company together now-a-days; the more pity that/ some honest neighbours will not make them friends.”* (III, i, 129-31). However, in many ways reason and love are already much more closely linked in their society than the modern day reader is used to.

Here, too, expressed through the events of the play, is Shakespeare's view of love in a well ordered society. While old people should be respected, it is not good for them to force their children into marrying against their will. But for young lovers to be happy, a process of growing up is necessary. They must choose wisely, following the example of Theseus and Hippolyta. Love which exists only in the imagination is blind, nothing shows this

more plainly than the wild confusion brought about in the woods. There the four lovers who lose all power of calm reasoning, and let their passions and jealousies rage on without control. They have become more like the fairies than like responsible human beings.¹⁵

At the beginning of the play, there is an evidence about the use of one's eyes in love when Theseus tries to convince Hermia to obey her father. The disobedient daughter says that she wishes that her father could see with her eyes. The Duke replies that her eyes ought to be governed by his judgment. When Oberon steps into the picture with his love juice, it is obvious that linking judgment to vision in matters of love is not as straightforward as Theseus thinks it is when Helen speaks of how the blind, winged boy Cupid, is the appropriate governor of love. She too brings up the question of using one's eyes in love. This motif comes to a climax when Oberon and Puck apply the magic juice to Titania, Lysander, and Demetrius. The charm is specifically directed at the eyes and under their spell, a person looks and loves in instant judgment, reason, will, are all of no account what so ever.¹⁶

3.2 Love and Sex

In the first scene of the second act of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, after Titania has remembered her Indian Votaress, Oberon remembers his 'imperial votaress'. He has once beheld:

*Flying between the cold moon and the earth.
Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon,*

*And the imperial votaress possed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.*

.....

*The juice of it on sleeping eye-lids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.*

(II, i, 156-68; 170-72)

Through these evocative monologues of Titania and Oberon one contrasted: Titania speaks of a mortal mother from the east: Oberon speaks of an invulnerable virgin from the west. Their memories express two myths of origin: Titania provides a genealogy for an explanation of why she will not part with him; Oberon provides an etiology of metamorphosed flower that he will be used to make her part with him.¹⁷

Reading or watching the play, one can notice that "Titania treats Bottom as if he were both her child and her lover"¹⁸, which seems entirely appropriate, since he is a substitute for the changling boy, who is in turn, Oberon's rival benign and sinister, imperious and enthralled. She dotes upon Bottom, and indulges on him all these desires to be felt, scratched, and coddled that render Bottom's dream recognizable to the audience as a paradic fantasy of infantile navissism and dependency.

In the following speech, Titania explains the paradic fantasy of upward social mobility. Titania mingles her enticement with threats:

*Out of this wood do not desire to go
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.
I am spirit of no common rate:
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I do love thee: therefore, go with me;
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost
sleep:
And I will purge thy mortal grossness so,
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.*
(III, i, 136-45)

Titania orders her attendants to “*Be kind and courteous to this gentleman*” (III, i, 148), to “*do him courtesies*” (III, i, 158), and to “*wait upon him*” (III, i, 177). She concludes the scene, however with an order to enforce her minions passivity, thus reducing him to the demeanor prescribed for women, children, and servants, “*Tie up my love's tongue, bring him silently.*” (III, i, 181). This reflects the dangerous power of feminism.¹⁹

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when the newly weds have retired for the night, Oberon and Titania enter the court in order to bless the 'bridebed' where the marriages were about to be consummated. By the act of defloration, the husband takes physical and symbolic possession of his bride.²⁰ At the beginning of the play, there is a sexual act, Theseus says to Hippolyta, “*I woo'd thee with my sword, / And won thy love, doing thee injures*”(I, i, 16-17). This speech refers to the sexual act in which the man draws blood from the woman.²¹ So, there is a clear sign of sexuality in the play and there is direct relation between love and sex.

VI

4.1 The Magic and the Love Potion

One of the most important elements that Shakespeare has used is “the fairies’ magic, which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play”.²² Shakespeare uses this element both to embody the most supernatural power of love (symbolized by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. The love potion is made from the juice of a flower that was state with one of the Cupid’s misfired arrows. It is used by the fairies to wreak romantic havoc throughout Act II, III and IV . Although the misuse of magic causes chaos, as when Puck mistakenly resolves the play's tension to Lysander's eyelids, magic ultimately resolves the play's tension by restoring play love to balance among the quartet of Athenian youths (Demetrius and Lysander are magically compelled to transfer their love from Hermia to Helena) - and Titania is hilariously humiliated. She is magically compelled to fall deeply in love with the ass-headed Bottom.²³ It is important to mention that male dominance is one of the essential themes in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. However Shakespeare’s female characters, in most of his comedies, are more powerful; yet, one of the purposes of love potion in this play is to tame Titania and bring her again to be under Oberon’s control.²⁴ The love potion thus becomes a symbol of the unreasoning, fickle, erratic, and undeniably powerful nature of love which can lead to inexplicable and bizarre behaviour and cannot be resisted.²⁵

4.2 The Unity of Three Worlds

In this play, there are three different worlds, or one can say different groups of people are brought together and their adventures made into a pattern. These three worlds were separated from each

other, but at the end of the play they are united, and the reason of the unity is love. These different groups are:

- a- The four young lovers.
- b- The ordinary working men and,
- c- The fairies

As it is mentioned earlier, at first the characters are introduced to the audience separately, group by group. The four lovers went to the woods, then the workmen who want to perform their play, in the woods. After that the fairies, under the Puck's magic, they come into contact with one another in a set of misunderstandings which become even wilder and more laughable, as a result of Puck's magic which reflects the supernatural power of love. One can understand from this, that love has a very great power which can unify even different worlds like those in the play. Love can make the miracles. Finally, all three groups are brought about into harmony under the wise authority of Theseus and Hippolyta. Thus, love and happiness prevail.²⁶

Conclusion

Love in this play is a romantic love, and Shakespeare comes to it again and again. It is not a realistic one nor tragic as with the case of Antony and Cleopatra, and Romeo and Juliet. Love between Theseus and Hippolyta is an ordinary love. Love between Hermia and Lysander is true love. They reached to their happy end after pain and suffering, even Love between Helena and Demetrius, was difficult. Helena suffered so much to gain Demetrius' love. Love of the four lovers was blind, unreasonable, as Bottom said, "**Reason and love keep little company together now-a-days,**" (*III, i, 129-30*) and love, wrongly directed, can be a dangerous thing. So, love needs reason and vice versa. One also can conclude that there is a sign of sexuality in the play, and there is a direct relation between love and

sex. Moreover, through the speech between Theseus and Hippolyta, and between Oberon and Titania, there is also a sexual act between the latter two. The play is planned to end happily and it does so.

Notes

- 1- William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. W. Turner (New Delhi: Co. (Pvt.) Ltd., ND), P. LX.
- 2- Ibid., P. LX.
- 3- Coles Notes, *William Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company Limited, 1984), P. 75.
- 4- Ibid., P. 76.
- 5- K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Shakespeare and His Art* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1964), P. 169.
- 6- William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1961), P. viii.
- 7- URL.<http://www.enotes.com/midsummer-nights-dream/q-and-a/from-which-shakespearean-work-does-quote-below-140643>, P. 2.
- 8- Coles Notes, P. 76.
- 9- Shakespeare, P. LX.
- 10 Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare: Text and Contexts* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), P. 14.
- 11- URL.<http://www.sparknotes.com/Shakespeare/themes.html>, P. 1.
- 12 Ibid., P. 1-2.
- 13 Shakespeare, P. LX.
- 14 Lever, P. ix.
- 15 Coles Notes, P. xiv.
- 16 Ibid., P. 15.

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- 17 Richard Danson Brown and David Johnson, *A Shakespeare Reader: Sources and Criticism* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), P.66.
- 18 Louis Adrian Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), P. 170, in *Shakespeare Studies: Volume XXXII*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New Jersey: Rosemount Publishing & Printing Corp., 2004), P. 107.
- 19 Richard and Johnson, P.67.
- 20 Ibid., P. 67.
- 21 Ibid., P. 67.
- 22 Sparknotes, P. 2.
- 23 Sparknotes, P. 3.
- 24 Leo Salingar, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), P. 226.
- 25 Sparknotes, P. 3.
- 26 Lever, P. ix.

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