

A view at william shakespeare's depiction of compassion as described in his play,...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



If there was no such thing as sympathy, empathy, or love in our world, it would be a hard place to live. If there was no hard law or reason in our world, it would be a crazy place to live. Neither of these worlds would be anybody's first choice as a home - it's just common sense: take away either of these two fundamental aspects of life, and everything is immediately chaos. In fact, it is only in a world such as ours, where legal and human emotion work together, that we are happy. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare recognizes this truth and uses the two settings to represent the city of Athens as law, order, civility, and judgment, while the woods represent chaos, incivility, dreams, and love. By having the play move between these two settings, Shakespeare is showing that one needs to balance law and order with dreams and love - he says that when there is only law, or when there are only dreams, nothing works out well; it is only when the two are combined that things work out.

In the city of Athens, reality related ideas such as law, order, and judgment, are supreme and have a tight hold over society; however, this system, without a balance of dreams and magic, rarely has good results. The unsoftened law of Athens is often much too harsh for the characters, and as a result, nothing can turn out well. This is exemplified in the first Act when Egeus, father of Hermia, asks Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to use the law that so defines Athens to bring drastic consequences upon his daughter, without taking love into account: " 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" (1. 4. 41-44). Egeus begs Theseus for the " Ancient Privilege of Athens," a law that says that "[Egeus] may dispose of

[Hermia].” Although he, “ according to [the] law,” can make Hermia marry the man that he approves of and only that man - or else she will be sent “ to her death,” Egeus takes no notice of his daughter’s true love - he just wants to stick to the law and his reason and judgment. This law, part of what defines Athens as such an orderly place, is being used without the knowledge of love, and because of this, none of the options would work out for anybody. Therefore, nobody will be happy if the law is carried out alone. Later in the scene, Theseus seems to agree with Egeus and warns Hermia that she must conform to the law, or else the consequences will be great. “ For you, fair Hermia, look you arm yourself to fit your fancies to your father’s will or else the law of Athens yields you up (Which by no means we may extenuate) to death, or to a vow of a single life” (1. 1. 117-121). Theseus is warning Hermia that she has to follow her “ father’s will,” or else the law will make her eligible for either death or going to a nunnery. He also says that none of them has the power to erase or lessen the law, as it has the supreme power over society in Athens. Regardless of her love, the Duke of Athens has to, by law, force Hermia to make this hard decision, which cannot end up well no matter what: either Hermia marries somebody she doesn’t love, or else she will die or be single for life. Theseus himself can’t even “ extenuate,” or lessen, the law, showing how much power it actually has over everybody in the city. This supremacy of the law in Athens forces Hermia into a situation that cannot end up well. If there were dreams, love, and magic to balance out the law, everything would be much easier and happier; however, at this point in the play, there are none, and so the law has

complete control. Shakespeare uses this to show that law without dreams cannot and should not exist.

The woods next to the city, on the other hand, are a place where reason and judgment have no hold whatsoever, a world where magic and love have hold over society; but this too leads to chaos without law and order to balance it out. The woods are the exact opposite of the city of Athens - all reason and judgment are lost once one ventures into them - and yet, the two settings have the same consequences. In the woods, Puck is describing to Oberon, the king of the resident fairies, how the Mechanicals, running away from the "new Bottom" (for Puck has by this point turned Bottom's head into that of an ass), without reason or judgment, began to imagine things that weren't there, and everything turned chaotic: "Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong, made senseless things begin to do them wrong, for briars and thorns at their apparel snatch Some sleeves, some hats; from yielders all things snatch: (3. 2. 27-30). Puck describes how the Mechanicals, running away from Bottom's changed face with "their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong," began to imagine sticks and briars grabbing at their clothes and hats as they ran away. Because the Mechanicals were in a place such as the woods, where reason and judgment have no hold, the Mechanicals made everything seem chaotic, at least in their minds. They stopped using reason, so they started to imagine things. This pandemonium was a result of the lack of reason and judgment in the woods. Similarly, in a different point in time but still in the woods, Lysander's decision to love Helena, made under the influence of magic, causes chaos later due to his

lack of true reason. " Not Hermia, but Helena I love. Who will not change a raven for a dove? The will of a man is by his reason swayed, and reason says you are the worthier maid" (2. 2. 119-122). Insisting that " Reason says that [Helena is] the worthier maid," Lysander demonstrates how the woods are a place of dreams: Lysander really loves Helena because of magic. As a result of this, there is no reason at all in Lysander telling Helena that she is a dove and Hermia a raven. This lack of reason and judgment creates a chain of events so chaotic and full of pandemonium, where Demetrius and Lysander love Helena, Helena thinks nobody loves her, and Hermia loves Lysander, that because of Lysander's actions, nothing is as it is supposed to be. It is the magic in a place of magic, dreams, and love, which without reason, judgment, and law to put in check, creates total chaos. The lack of order in the following scenes, therefore, is a direct result of an initial lack of reason and judgment - turning the plotline into a spiral. The absence of law and order in the woods is critical and noticeable, making right things wrong and creating chaos everywhere.

Although separately laws and dreams can have drastic consequences, when they come together, as they do in the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, everything turns out well. The lovers bring their experience, love, and dreams from the woods into the law, order, and reason in the city of Athens, and everything - seemingly instantly - is fixed for them. In Act Four, the lovers wake up on the edge of the woods, full of " dreams" from the woods, and are met by Theseus, who greets them: " Fair lovers, you are fortunately met. Of this discourse we more will hear anon. Egeus, I will overbear your

will. For in the temple, by and by, and with us these couples shall eternally be knit" (4. 1. 174-178). Theseus sees the lovers, and decides that he can now "overbear [Egeus'] will" and let the couples get married according to their true love. He says that they will, in fact, be married soon. The lovers have already been in the woods with all of the dreams and magic, so when they come into contact with people from the world of law, everything is able to work out again. Theseus decides that he can override the law in favor of love when he sees the true love that was brought out in the woods, and the dreams are accepted into the world of law. It was the collision of the two worlds, dreams and reason, that enabled the decision to let the couples marry who they wanted to and enabled everything to be fixed. Later in Act Four, still contemplating the amazing way everything worked out, Demetrius and the lovers wonder if it is possible that everything has worked out and realize that they have, in fact, been asked to bring their dreams to Athens. "Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream. Do you not think the duke was here, and bid us follow him?" (4. 1. 189-192). Demetrius and all of the other lovers are wondering if it is possible that everything has worked out so well, or if it is just a dream, as they are used to from their time in the woods. Then they all confirm that they were, in fact, bid to follow Theseus and Egeus into Athens. Being asked to come into the city by Theseus is a symbol for the two worlds merging - the lovers, with their dreams and magic (for Demetrius is still under the spell at this point) are being beckoned by the enforcer of law in the world of law, meaning that everything will become right. The lovers realize this and are wondering why

it is so. When the lovers do go to Athens, everything will, with the combination of dreams and reason, turn out right.

In Shakespeare's world, there are two different settings that are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of what concepts have control over society. In Athens, the civilized city, people are controlled by their sense of reason and judgment and by the law, while their emotional side - the side that appeals to dreams, love, and even insanity at times - seems to be blocked. This can almost never work out for the characters, for the lack of feeling makes something go wrong. In the woods, however, it is the sense of cool-minded reason that is blocked out or lost, and the mind is engulfed in craziness, incivility, and love, succumbing readily to dreams. This too, however, cannot end up "happily ever after," because without reason anything is viable to happen - and anything is rarely always good. It is only when these two opposite extremes are combined and pushed together, forcefully if need be, that good results are produced. It is very likely that Shakespeare was trying to get across to his audience that love could not exist without law, and law could not exist without emotion. It is possible that this came from his own experience - indeed, many people think that Shakespeare himself was forced into a marriage with a woman that he did not love. If this is so, or even if it is not, Shakespeare seems to feel very strongly that the two worlds of love and law too often exist separately, and need to be combined for a happy life.