

Women's conformity in a midsummer night's dream and othello

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



Emilia from Othello and Helena from A Midsummer Night's Dream both experience a constant battle against the institutions of men, such as marriage and courting. These institutions have the implications of turning these women against their own sex and self because of the institutions' placing of gender upon them. Both voice their complaints against these institutions as well as conform to the standards set by them, but in the end are eventually silenced by the institutions, relating the idea that conformity to these institutions is not a choice, but a way of life or death for these women. When Helena first appears in Act 1 she is inseparable from her irrational love for a man. She dotes on Demetrius, but he finds Hermia more attractive. This causes Helena to wish that she was not herself, which begins her cycle of self-deprecation: " 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;"(1. 1. 226-228). Even though she is believed to be beautiful by all of Athens, she only desires the affection and admiration of one man without this she is nothing. Essentially, she wants to be someone or something else to gain Demetrius' favor, which becomes more evident as the characters enter the woods. In this monologue by Helena she mentions that Hermia stole Demetrius' love from her, which deepens the intra-gender rivalry. This institution of courting and wooing sets up a division between the female sex as they vie for the desire of males. Although Hermia is not to blame for Demetrius' interest in her, Helena places the burden upon her instead of Demetrius because she loves him. This creates a break within female companionship, and thereby making the men in this play all the more powerful and enhancing their control through the method of divide and

conquer. This idea becomes clearer as the play ventures into the magical woods, where roles come into question. Emilia faces a similar situation with her husband Iago and her lady Desdemona. The problem that presents itself is Othello's handkerchief, a seemingly meaningless object that comes to mean everything. Emilia's job as an attendant becomes significant because her duty is to protect her lady, but also is "employed" by Iago to be his wife. Immediately she has become caught between the sexes and must choose between her own and her husband. Before the handkerchief situation, she is completely subject to her husband's needs, which leaves her open to his abuse. In Act 2 Scene 1, Iago goes on a tirade about women in front of Desdemona and Emilia, harshly criticizing Emilia for her treatment of him. Emilia is silenced by her husband and it is Desdemona that speaks up for her: "O, fie upon thee, slanderer!" (2. 1. 129). Reversely, Emilia later favors Iago by giving him the handkerchief sealing Desdemona's fate and death, by catering to her husband she gets another woman silenced forever. However, it is Desdemona's situation with Othello that brings Emilia to criticize the institutions of men and men in general, but until this point she is totally enamored of her husband as noted when she states what she will do with the handkerchief: "And give't Iago. What he will do with it heaven knows, not I; I nothing but to please his fantasy" (3. 3. 335). Her words "I nothing" call attention to the dehumanization and deprecation of herself. She does not say "I am," which furthers the idea that she does not see herself as anything, but as servant to Iago. Interestingly, Iago's name begins with an "I", Shakespeare uses this capital letter to indicate throughout the play the deception and penetration of Iago's schemes, and in this instance it implies

his control over Emilia. In addition, she echoes Helena, who is also willing to do anything to please her man and knows of nothing else. Now that both women have been placed in precarious situations by the institutions, it allows for them to criticize the very institutions that placed them there. The situations that these two women are put in by the institutions allow them to question the very institutions that they are entrapped. Helena begins questioning the institutions of men within the forest, where the laws of Athens do not apply. It is within this realm that she is able to question the powers that be, because when she returns to Athens she is re-subjected to male dominance and no longer voices complaints. However, within the forest she becomes a dynamic character rather than her simply overly loving one. In the beginning of the forest sequence, Helena humiliates herself in front of Demetrius by begging for his love: "What worser place can I beg in your love-And yet a place of high respect with me- than to be used as you use your dog" (2. 1. 208-210). This can be likened to Emilia's removal of the word "am" in her speech in that it subjects her to men, however Helena's rhetoric degradation is far less subtle emphasizing her plight for love and irreconcilable desire for Demetrius. Her attempt to "woo" Demetrius ultimately fails in "her opinion" because of a difference between the sexes as she notes in her rhyming couplet: "We cannot fight for love, as men may do; We should be wooed, and were not made to woo" (2. 1. 241-242). Shakespeare uses a couplet to emphasize this difference between the sexes, suggesting that it is not just Helena, but rather all women are unable to woo and must remain passive bystanders to obtain their lovers. In the forest men require potions to begin their wooing of Helena and use a similar technique

that Helena used toward Demetrius, but it is Helena's reaction to this wooing that deserves attention. She has become so corrupted by the male institutions of courtship that she can no longer believe when someone actually has affection for her. Her self-deprecation has led to a belief that others could never fall for her. As Demetrius and Lysander attempt to seduce her she remarks that it is a "...manly enterprise, To conjure tears up in a poor maid's eyes, (3. 2. 157-158). She believes that both these men are tricking her and chiding her for her unabated love for Demetrius and that is simply what men do. She finally tires of the scorn she feels from men and no longer wants to be treated in such a manner. She does not mind being hated as much as she wants to be respected by others, which differs entirely from her previous reduction of herself to a canine. Yet again the blunt of her discourse falls upon Hermia, who Helena believes to be in cahoots with Demetrius and Lysander in this "manly enterprise." She verbally attacks Hermia, noting: "Our sex, as well I may chide you for it, Though I alone do feel the injury" (3. 2. 218-219). She separates Hermia as a traitor to the sex and creates herself as the sex's martyr. Because of the men's actions, which are controlled by other men (Puck, Oberon), both women fall victim to the institutional forces. Men are actually playing games with them, literally because of the actions of Puck and Oberon, but the women fail to see this trickery and find each other to be the enemy. Finally, instead of attacking their oppressors, the women fight against themselves with Hermia trying to gouge Helena's eyes out, which points to the blindness to the hegemony of men and seeing other women to blame rather than men. Not seeing men as they truly are also plays a role in Emilia's relationship with Iago. Emilia only

begins to open up to the seedy side of men, due to Othello's treatment of Desdemona. After Othello has questioned Desdemona about the handkerchief, Emilia remarks about the nature of men: " They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungerly, and when they are full, They belch us" (3. 4. 116-119). This scene ending speech adds to the list of plights of women, men are only interested as long as women fulfill their needs, but when women are no longer needed they are expelled from men's lives, which sheds light on Iago's treatment of her, yet she sees Iago as a glorious man to be honored. Her questioning of the institutions reaches a boiling point, however, in Act 4 Scene 3 in which she examines her position against men. She talks of the equality between the sexes, but having to prove it to the opposite sex: " Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace, Yet we some revenge. Let husbands know, their wives have senses like them" (4. 3. 106-109). Although she questions, she also stays within her sphere, she still defines herself as a " wife" and not a woman, which leaves her under Iago's control. It is not until the end of the play that she finally breaks with her husband and resides on the side of her own sex. Although both women voice complaints against the male institutions, these institutions eventually silence them. As the characters in *Midsummer Night's Dream* exit the forest, the natural order of gender roles returns. Helena no longer voices complaints against Demetrius loving her and instead embraces it: " I have found Demetrius like a jewel, Mine own, and not mine own." She declares that she does not have ownership of Demetrius even though they are in love, the first time she seems level in the play. However, Demetrius through this relationship does exert his power over her. Even though she appears in the

last act, she does not utter a single line of dialogue. She, who has been a constant and lengthy source of dialogue throughout the play has had her power of speech taken away, she has been silenced by finally gaining Demetrius, but in this gain she loses her ability to speak. She is merely a body upon the stage, a prop, which harkens back to male control. Emilia in contrast, who has been silent for the most part of the play in regards to her husband, finally speaks against him. Once she has learned of Othello's murder of Desdemona and Iago's role in this tragedy, she speaks: "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak" (5. 2. 217). For the first time Emilia is fully on the side of her sex, abandoning her husband and protecting the name of Desdemona. But in speaking out, she is silenced by Iago as he stabs her to death. Emilia's last wish is to be laid by her mistress furthering her full commitment to her sex. Emilia and Helena are both silenced, but in radically different ways. Interestingly, this is the final institution they face: genre. Though the women have similar views about what should be done with men, they are treated differently in their respective genre. Helena is silenced through marriage, a comedic trope. At the end of the play, all is well in the world of Shakespeare, but from a modern perspective her loss of lines and thoughts remain tragic. Now that Lysander and Helena are coupled, that Lysander speaks for both of them. Her husband silences Emilia because he kills her, making it into a clear-cut tragedy. She becomes a lifeless body on the stage, much in the way Helena has in the final act. Helena experiences a spiritual death, while Emilia is completely eliminated from the play for committing treason against her husband. The genre determines the type of death, but not surprisingly another man has constructed it: Shakespeare.

Helena from A Midsummer Night's Dream and Emilia from Othello allow us to visit the impossible situations that women are put in by men. In these situations, these women struggle with themselves in relation to their male counterparts and these events lead to self-doubt, treason, and love lost or won. The women seem to hate men as well as love them at the same time, thereby questioning institutions as well as conforming to them. Yet these two women differ because of the institution of genre where they reside predetermining their "happy" or tragic ends before their first line is spoken.