

# The ecofeminist layer of a midsummer night's dream

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



According to Simon Estok, ecofeminism is defined as the paternalistic society driving a wedge between society and culture. In addition, it consists of the connection between the dominating of nature and the exploitation of women. Estok, as well as many others, have taken the time to look at the work of Shakespeare through an eco-critical lens in order to create new perspectives on the works. While Shakespeare is considered to be one of the most progressive and pro feminist writers during his time, his approach to portraying is not always obvious and direct. Readers often find Shakespeare using irony, sarcasm, comedy, and satire on patriarchal society.

In his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare goes to extreme lengths throughout the play to show how ridiculous men in society often act towards women and how it is only right and fair for a woman to rebel. In 1. 1, Theseus and Hermia go through an exchange that, while comical, points heavily towards the issues during the time frame concerning the patriarchal society. The scene begins with Hermia's father, Egeus, coming to Theseus, the duke of Athens, with complaints about his daughter's rebellion concerning her marriage. Theseus begins his speech with a couple of threats:

65) Either to die the death or to adjure

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,

70) You can endure the livery of a nun...

Although it is important to remember that Shakespeare's plays were acted out in their time and not meant for reading, the first three lines of Theseus' serious threat on Hermia's life give a reader a detailed image of Theseus speaking to her as if she is an inferior. The audience gets the sense that Hermia is nothing more than a tool subject only to her father's use. Her two options are to either be executed or to never see a man in her life again. The audience gets this image of Theseus approaching Hermia in close quarters as he says, "Therefore, fair Hermia..." to show his dominance. Flattery of women by male figures in authority is often not even for the purpose of flattery. Rather, in calling her "fair Hermia," Theseus in no way is attempting to be endearing. Those two words are what ultimately take these lines from a gentle warning from a caring duke, to the threat of a powerful tyrant. The audience gathers this picture of the Duke, touching Hermia's face as if she is his hostage, as he softens his voice to call her beautiful. It is through the objectifying of women that men in Shakespeare's plays gather their power and dominance over women. If women are convinced they are nothing more than objects, then that is exactly how they will respond in situations such as these. Another key word to focus on in this speech is the word "desires." While in today's English, desires might lead one to believe there is reference to a decision of some kind. Yet, in this instance, Theseus is merely demanding that Hermia change her feelings about Demetrius, the man her father wishes she wed. Next, as if mocking her with words of objectivity is

not enough for Theseus, he then moves to reminding her of her age.

Reminding Hermia of her youth shows the reader that Theseus and other men in this society only view a grown, European male with authority, worthy of respect. Yet, it is Shakespeare's intention in these lines to create a feeling of power for women. As she essentially staring death in the face to a point, Hermia, as the audience finds out throughout the play, calls the bluff her father and Theseus and follows her heart.

However, according to Theseus if Hermia does not listen to him and her father, it will hardly be a life worth living. Theseus lays out Hermia's future if she is defiant by saying:

70) You can endure the livery of a nun,

For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,

To live a barren sister all your life,

Chanting faint hymns to the cold, fruitless moon.

Thrice-blessèd they that master so their blood...

The first word to focus on is "endure." Shakespeare is someone who is always intentional in his word choice. Here, Theseus describes the life of a nun as merely a life that is to be endured, rather than to be enjoyed. Rather than focusing on how a nun might see spending her time in solitude and faith to their Lord, Theseus paints a picture of a cold, desolate, closet-like meditation prison to be endured by Hermia, with only the sorrow of other

nuns to accompany her. Yet, it is clear that Theseus gives at least a little respect for this decision in line 74 when he points out that a nun is “Thrice-blessèd” for mastering their flesh. In Shakespearean language, this word is to mean either “three times or extremely.” (OED). In context, Theseus means to say Hermia will be blessed three times over in heaven as she is on earth for abstaining from sexual relations with a male suitor. Even though he acknowledges that this type of life is one to be greatly respected, he quickly flees from words of respect to words of mockery. He essentially calls the life of a nun ridiculous and depressing. In using adjectives such as cold and fruitless, Theseus is really describing her barren womb rather than the actual moon. After Theseus mocks the ideas of remaining a virgin forever, readers and audiences see a direct comparison of Hermia to nature.

76) But earthlier happy is the rose distilled

Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,

Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.

When reading this passage, it is important to consider the lines through an eco critical lens. According to the Open Source Shakespeare Concordance, Shakespeare compares women to a rose in 26 of his works—including three other times in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Even though comparing women to nature can be used to describe their beauty, it is here that Theseus is further objectifying Hermia, in order to establish his male dominance. In this sense, Theseus is using a seemingly romantic choice of words as a direct insult and threat to Hermia. Although Theseus is blatantly disregarding the humanity of

Hermia, he does not see this in himself. As a man, he is merely doing his duty as the Duke of Athens to remind this woman that her love means nothing when it stands in the way of her father's will. In fact, in line 76, Theseus says to Hermia that she can only have value if she loses her virginity to the man her father desires for her. If Hermia does not listen to him, than she is nothing more than an unused flower that was birthed, lived briefly without purpose, and died for nothing. Yet, according to Theseus, if she listens, he tells Hermia that she may have purpose in her life. If she chooses the her father's desire-Demetrius-then she will be a beautiful rose that is plucked and used as a beautiful fragrance, that ultimately is used by her to appease men. It is also possible that Shakespeare is comparing the viable and used womb itself to a rose, while the virgin to a thorn. While comparing women to nature may be seen as a form of flattery, an ecofeminism lens will point out that it is merely another way for men to assert their dominance over women through objectivity.

Whilst Shakespeare is a renowned comedic playwright, he uses subtle language and rhetoric to portray anything but comedic topics through comedies. When looked at through an eco-critical lens, the reader gathers a new perspective on possible motives of Shakespeare in writing these comedies. It seems that, through the comparison of women to nature, that Shakespeare wishes to show that men will often only utilize flattery for their own gain. Through outlandish situations such as the love potions in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare reminds audiences how men are unstable and slaves to love just as often as women may be.