

# A midsummer night's dream: sisterhood versus male inconstancy

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



In his comedies, Shakespeare critically examines the nature of female and male friendships as they relate to sexual desire. Specifically, Shakespeare contrasts the strong, faithful bonds of female sisterhood with the chaotic, contentious character of male rivalries. Without men, the women of Shakespeare's comedies are completely capable of sustaining fulfilling relationships, nurtured by the loyalty and intimacy of sisterly love. Left to their own devices, men fall into competition with each other, almost as though combat and dissent are the default states of male interaction. These profound differences between male and female relationships are manifested in the characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While the men are linked solely through mutual jealousy, the women are connected through kindred ties. While the men are fickle with their affection, the women remain faithful to their feelings. In the play, heterosexual desire is seen as disrupting—even damaging—the innate innocence and virtue of girlhood friendships. In addition, the conflict that arises from this desire is seen as a product of patriarchal law, a system Shakespeare is also critiquing. By making these palpable distinctions, juxtaposing love and devotion with the tumult and inconstancy of the patriarchy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* posits the sisterhood as a superior alternative to heterosexual relationships. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows four Grecian youths, Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius and Helena, as they flee a strict Athenian society for the sexual freedom of the forest (Shakespeare's "Green World"). In the context of the play, Athenian patriarchal law, much like the law dictating the political climate of Elizabethan England, is founded on a principle of male supremacy. This belief argues that women are "naturally inferior to men and must

therefore accept male domination." In addition, marriages in Athens require the consent of a parent, echoing the moral ideas espoused by Puritans in Shakespeare's time. Therefore, unmarried daughters are regarded as the property of their fathers. Such is the case with Hermia and her father, Egeus. Privileged in this way, Egeus has the right to select whom Hermia shall marry; he has chosen Demetrius. However, Hermia has found her own love with Lysander, and refuses to wed another man. Under the stipulations of the law, she risks death or "a vow of single life" (I. i. 121) if she does not obey the command of her father. Faced with the decision to either accept wedded life to Demetrius or suffer the consequences of her objection, Hermia resolves to escape with Lysander to house of his aunt. Here, outside the jurisdiction of the city, they may be free to marry. A dowager, Lysander's aunt is known as a *femme sole*, one of the only women within this patriarchal order able to retain her property. Thus, Hermia and Lysander's flight is an inversion of the patriarchal model embodied by Egeus, for they are replacing a harsh Athenian government with the laws of nature and free love. This backdrop not only provides for a critique of Egeus' viewpoint, it also establishes a setting in which the vivid disparity between male and female friendships may be fully discerned. Early in the play, Shakespeare establishes the bonds of sisterhood shared between Hermia and Helena. We learn that they are girlhood friends who would often escape into the wood, where "upon faint primrose beds [they] were wont to lie" (I. i. 215). However, it is clear that the girls' current sexual attraction to Lysander and Demetrius threatens the stability of their own relationship. Because she has agreed to flee with Lysander to this same location in the woods, Hermia is

sacrificing an emblem of her friendship with Helena to her heterosexual desire for Lysander. In this way, he is supplanting Helena's place in Hermia's life. "Farewell, sweet playfellow" (I. i. 220), Hermia says, equating her escape from Athens to a fracturing of this childhood union. Here, the play illustrates how heterosexual relationships can only be forged once the bonds of sisterhood have been dissolved. We will see the girls' behavior in the forest solidify this chasm, as the damage their friendship has suffered under the taint of sexual desire becomes more apparent. Sharply contrasting with this sisterly love is the fierce rivalry maintained by the young men of the play. From the very beginning of the drama, one observes the contentious relationship between Demetrius and Lysander. Because his marriage to Hermia has been sanctioned by Egeus' approval, Demetrius feels entitled to Hermia as one would feel entitled to a piece of property. He demands, "Relent, sweet Hermia, and, Lysander, yield / Thy crazéd title to my certain rights" (I. i. 91-92). Whereas Lysander at least articulates a concept of "love" in relation to Hermia, as he feels this sufficiently legitimates their marriage, Demetrius never makes such a mention. He invokes a purely legal language. For example, in asking Lysander to "yield his crazéd title," Demetrius is mistaking what is Lysander's love, for a faulty, unsubstantiated claim to Hermia. Evidently, Demetrius can only understand her in these terms. Therefore, it seems that Demetrius wants Hermia not because he cares for her or even regards her in an emotional, organic way. He is simply engaging in competition with Lysander, wishing to gain the upper hand in their rivalry. However, it is crucial to note that even Lysander speaks about Hermia as property. To Egeus' insistence that he has unequivocally

bestowed his legal right of Hermia upon Demetrius, Lysander responds: I am, my lord, as well derived as he, As well possessed; my love is more than his; My fortunes every way as fairly ranked (If not with vantage) as Demetrius' And (which is more than all these boasts can be) I am beloved of beautiful Hermia. Why should not I then prosecute my right? (I. i. 99-105) Lysander is not disputing Egeus' rights of his daughter. In fact, he accepts the patriarchal model and recognizes Hermia as the property of her father. In sympathizing with Egeus, Lysander calls into question the integrity of his purported love for Hermia. Because it structures both the language and conceptions that come to define the "heterosexual relationship," patriarchal law itself is seen as fostering male rivalries. Even with the transformative power of the forest and Oberon's love potion, this male bitterness and dissent does not waver. Awakening under the potion's "love-in-idleness" spell, Lysander first gazes upon Helena. Instantly, he transfers to her the (perhaps not-so-true) love he has been expressing for Hermia throughout the play. However, he immediately follows (and in a sense underscores) this revelation by exclaiming, "Where is Demetrius? Oh, how fit a word / Is that vile name to perish on my sword!" (II. ii. 106-107) His capacity to love is rendered weak by the ease with which it shifts, its susceptibility to change. On the other hand, Lysander's brotherhood of hatred, the contempt he feels for Demetrius, cannot be penetrated by exterior forces. Lysander's complete abandonment of Hermia as the object of his affection reflects another issue at the core of Shakespeare's investigation: the problem of male inconstancy. In contrasting the effect the love potion has over both male rivalry and heterosexual devotion, Shakespeare demonstrates the capriciousness of

sexual attraction. He identifies the danger of male faithlessness as a primary cause. Like Lysander, Demetrius falls under the power of Oberon's potion. In the first few acts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Demetrius is steadfast in his attempts to thwart Helena's advances, clearly not reciprocating the love she feels for him. He uses callous, cruel words to express his dislike, declaring "Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit, / For I am sick when I do look at thee" (II. i. 211-212). However, under the potion's spell, Demetrius suddenly appears to be a completely different man. He now exalts Helena as a "goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!" (III. ii. 137) He rejects Hermia, telling Lysander to "keep thy Hermia: I will none. / If e'er I loved her, all that love is gone" (III. ii. 169-170). How can a relationship possibly achieve longevity when it depends upon the support of players who so blatantly lack any semblance of conviction? How worthwhile or valid is a life where fickleness is guaranteed first before even a modicum of fidelity? These questions directly allude to the fundamental defects of the patriarchal order Shakespeare explores in the play. Responsible for the flawed nature of heterosexual desire, male inconstancy also threatens Hermia and Helena's sisterhood. It tears at the fabric of the girls' friendship, one that has been unraveling since the beginning of the play. Only when confronted with the hypocrisy and incredulity of this male behavior do the girls turn on each other; only here do the bonds of their relationship begin to collapse. Helena laments over the loss of the friendship she and Hermia once shared. The sisterhood Helena describes is one of beauty and kindred virtue. She speaks of herself and Hermia as "two lovely berries molded on one stem...with two seeming bodies, but one heart" (III. ii. 211-212). And now, for Hermia to "rent [their]

ancient love asunder / To join with men in scorning [her] poor friend" (III. ii. 215-216), seems to Helena like an ultimate betrayal. Theirs was a relationship defined by constancy, embracing an intimacy that extended beyond the boundaries of kinship, and certainly beyond the lust-love of sexual attraction. However, this very sexual desire has inevitably undermined the girls' closeness, corrupting the warm, rich life history they have created. Clearly, girlhood bonds are devoid of the disorder and ambivalence typifying heterosexual relationships. By treating these relationships as exaggerated, comical caricatures of "love," *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exposes their folly. Sexual attraction does not offer the comforts of commitment and trust, for it cannot guarantee the stability of male affection. However, one can be assured that female friendships will promote and adhere to these ideals. The strength and significance of the sisterhood are fully realized with the conclusion of the play, where Helena and Hermia's constancy seems to have healed Demetrius and Lysander's fierce rivalry. In speaking to Lysander, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, observes, "How comes this gentle concord in the world / That hatred is so far from jealousy / To sleep by hate and fear no enmity?" (IV. i. 142-143) In gendering fidelity and highlighting the differences between male and female bonds, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* constructs sisterhoods as fulfilling alternatives to heterosexual relationships. Breakable only under the damaging influences of carnal desire—and the patriarchal law which capitalizes upon and perpetuates this desire—the sisterhood is the sole source of true, faithful love.