

Chapter I

Introduction: Aim and Method

This research paper analyzes the themes of marriage and relationships in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and the way these plays were related with the social structures and conditions of Shakespeare's age, attesting the continuity of the fundamental features of marriage over centuries. In studying Shakespeare's comedies it is important to apprehend the historical context in which the plays were performed, the role of the female in society and how marriages took place. This being understood, it will be easier to notice that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice* reflect aspects of the reality of those times.

My aim is to present in an accessible manner one of the most popular themes in the world reflected in these two comedies of Shakespeare. Precisely, I intend to depict how love and its resultant emotions are mirrored in these plays and how social relationships, marriages and moral values are promoted in the background of those times. The aim is to supply with accuracy relevant information upon the approached theme and offer the reader an appropriate and well informed study.

In writing this thesis I appealed to a large variety of sources that helped me display in a facile manner the diversity of examples that can better illustrate marriages and relationships in Shakespeare's comedies. Most of the sources were critical essays that helped to enhance the enjoyment of understanding literature easily. Some excerpts included will require further reading or connecting the excerpts with the play under study.

In approaching the topic of this book, I combined the historical and cultural perspective of the Elizabethan age with the theatrical conventions that reflect marriages and relationships on stage. Marriage was the central topic of the shakespearean comedy and it was presented in terms of a social union because it was the foundation of society.

I started with describing the historical and social context and its impact on people and households. Although today love is the most important reason for getting married, in Elizabethan times, it was generally considered foolish to marry for love. Love may occur at long last, but there were other main terms and conditions that decided the formation of wedlock. These criteria are particularized in the second chapter, where we will discover that arranging a marriage was

not the judgment of two people who loved each other, but their union was a fact decided by their families. Religious agreement, good birth, health, wealth, personal qualities, age, rarely mutual liking were some of the significant factors in selecting a spouse.

We will also get acquainted with the role of the females in society, their implication in cultural activities and also their taste in clothing and beauty. Shakespeare was a mirror of the struggles of the women who tried to gain more freedoms, rights, education and respect.

Marriage and family were the central institutions of private life for Shakespeare's contemporaries. They were also the basis of the household, which was seen as the basic building block of society. The issues that marriage threw up are, therefore, not surprisingly among the most prevalent ones reflected in the plots and structures, and also the textures and motivations, of the plays of Shakespeare's age.

Further, this research paper analyzes the Elizabethan stage conventions and the methods of creating a better effect on the spectators. As we know, going into the theatre was one of the most favourite activities for the members of the London society. There was an open exchange between actors and public that contributed to the creation of the theatre's atmosphere. In Shakespeare's plays, theatrical conventions were most evident in passages of dancing, clowning, music. Poetry, asides, soliloquies, female roles played by boys and some other conventions kept the play moving and delivered the message of the story to the audience.

In the third chapter, marriage and relationships are portrayed in several different ways regarding the two comedies. Love may be seen as a risky business adventure, as it is in *The Merchant of Venice*. The reader will also encounter with the mature love of Theseus and Hippolyta from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the power struggle between the couple Oberon and Titania, the main couples Lysander and Hermia, and Demetrius and Helena, who emphasize the value of love and its strange and irrational up-turn.

I intended to highlight the exposure of marriage and relationships in their various ways on the stage remembering the representative elements of love. One of those elements is the ring, whose symbol suggested fidelity, while the loss of it might mean infidelity. Shakespeare supports the idea that people of different religions and different locations could get married, even though in the Elizabethan age most people married within their district.

As we will further notice, Shakespeare's comedies have a happy ending, where peace is restored and harmony is established, followed by marital satisfaction and happiness. Usually, in

preoccupied with cosmetics and fashion trends. Inadequate food, hygiene and dangerous child-birth practices were even more constant enemies of the lower classes.⁴

Shakespeare was a mirror of the struggles of the women who tried to gain more freedoms, rights, education and respect. Law was one of the many domains women were not allowed in but still they managed to fight for their rights. The idea of independent women speaking free in court was too alarming for most men. There was a tension between women's right to legal process and the independence that could accompany that right. Women participated in civil litigation in a variety of different courts even though they didn't fit easily into this world of pits and pedestals.

As Tim Stretton observes regarding the situation of women in Elizabethan times, It may be significant that depictions of slander and false accusation against women became prominent in dramatic works at a time when concern about male and female sexual reputation were particularly prominent, when women were coming to dominate rising levels of defamation prosecutions in the church courts and when the law of slander was in flux and undergoing rapid change. However, the image of a woman on trial is one of the most persistent and enduring in literature- stretching from Homer to the Bible to the present day.⁵

The one example in Shakespeare of a woman at law who is not herself on trial is Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. She plays the role of a judge not a litigant, and she does it disguised as a male. She remains a remarkable example of a woman exercising amazing courage to speak in public. If Shylock insists on the letter of the law, Portia represents human feelings, mercy, equity. Portia and Venice could be a symbol of the justice of the New Testament and Shylock the justice of the Old Testament.

2. Arranging marriage

In the Elizabethan time, marriage was a necessity because women who did not marry risked to be considered witches. Marriages were arranged by their families regarding their rank and social

⁴ Courtney Crump Wright, *The Woman of Shakespeare's plays* (Maryland: Univeristy Press of America, 1993), p.9.

⁵ Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 57-58.

preferring marriages within respective social classes, but not so much for religious reasons as to maintain social order.

A third factor in selecting a spouse was wealth. From the religious point of view, there was believed that wealth should not be a factor in choosing spouse. One reason was fear that good relations would continue only as long as the money lasted. The parental quest to find husband for their daughters by providing substantial dowries was likened to ranchers selling horses and sheep. In practice, the admonition not to marry for wealth often was ignored.

Wealth was frequently a factor in arranging marriages among the propertied classes, including the yeomanry, but there is no way to categorize cases along religious lines. In *The Merchant of Venice* we have an example of a marriage which Bassanio was interested in mostly because he was broke. He saw Portia as a real treasure, a conquest he should have. Even though love comes after they meet, the first factor for Bassanio in choosing his spouse regarded the money she had from her dead father. If most people used marriage as a way to consolidate the position of their prestigious family, we can see that personal interests had its influence. "In Belmont there is a lady richly left / [...] And many Jasons come in quest of her." (1.1.6)

A fourth factor in selecting marital partners was personal qualities. In poetry, but also in prose it was shown how the concern of the Puritans was based on the inner qualities. A woman should keep her virginity and modesty in order to easily get married. Otherwise, she would be considered dishonorable. The basic maxim was expressed in the note to Proverbs 18:22 in the Geneva Bible: A man with a virtuous qualification in a maiden is chastity and modesty. Before marriage an examination must be made to determine if a prospective spouse possessed godly virtues by observing personal reputation, appearance, speech, apparel, companions, education and upbringing. Virtue was more valuable to Puritan authors than a substantial dowry or physical attractiveness, so parents must advise children to have more respect for inner graces than external appearances.

An even more difficult factor to assess is mutual liking or love. Again, this criterion was a matter of greater concern to Puritan commentators than to Anglicans, although it was argued that wedlock should be based in part on a love that grows and endures. Still, some Elizabethan marriages for love took place. The increased education of girls resulted in a greater capacity for emotional experience, including love.

It was the psychological factor that determined men and women to get used to each other after marriage. After they were taken away and detached from their parents, women got attracted by their husbands because they needed protection and someone to love them as they no longer had their families next to them. So, the nuclear family started to grow and give stability to the home. What really mattered were the mutual attraction and the compatibility and not exclusively the physical beauty, which might cause a vain temptation.

Some attention was accorded to other factors too. Age mattered, because it was important for people to marry someone close to their age. A little gap of years between people would not mind, but if there was a big difference of age, for example a gap of ten or twenty years there would definitely appear some problems. A twenty-year gap between husband and wife was not preferred, even though men felt that the age differential facilitated the husband's rule of the household. A difference of four or five years was favorable, but people still argued against significant age differentials. Elderly men must not marry young women, in part due to their inability to satisfy the latter sexually. Moreover, people tend to blame the husband's death on a young wife for causing him worry about her sexual behavior. Neither should a young man marry an older woman; to do it for wealth is wrong and leads to female domination and jealousy and unfavorable comparisons with a former husband create unpleasant relationships. Puritans condemned such marriages on the grounds that covetousness and lechery were more likely. Wedlock between persons significantly disparate in age was criticized because of their possible inability to procreate.

In a society where wealth and birth were valued, and wardship was a reality, marriages of spouses substantially different in age occurred, often because of the desire for family alliances or property considerations. The rate of mortality in childbirth forced some men to marry several times in the hope of producing a male heir; for such a purpose they tended to select young wives.

Another consideration was health; People were urged not to wed someone with a contagious disease or mental illness. Men were advised to choose a woman with a healthy body and a good complexion, regarding also a woman's fertility as important, which was an opinion widely shared, especially among the landed classes. Other factors occasionally were mentioned: vocational preparation had to be undertaken prior to marriage, hence a girl should refuse a young man not duly prepared. Political advantage sometimes was considered in the upper social levels.

him when he goes to bed, when he is asleep and when he wakes up.

When Bottom meets Titania, he feels more comfortable with the fairies, who are named for things familiar to him: Moth, Mustardseed and Cobweb. Then, it follows a funny scene in which Bottom leans back and asks the fairies to bring him gifts. He is a foolish, plebeian artisan, accidentally inducted into a fantasy world where he happily enjoys the moment without knowing that his head was affected by the fantastic illusion of a magic spell. He is brought into the enchanted, erotic world of Titania containing sexual tensions that give the whole experience a distinctly erotic aura.

Bottom can be wise and witty, serious and playful, weighty and comic. Titania finds him as wise as beautiful and falls in love with Bottom for the sound of his voice and shape of his looks. Despite the fairy queen's passionate and growing love for him, Bottom wants to escape. He is a prisoner of love, as Titania says to him not to wish to leave the forest. In order to make him remain voluntarily, she makes promises to him and orders the fairies to satisfy his needs. Bottom is having the time of his life, while Titania takes him as an object of her sexual desires.

Bottom is Oberon's "instrument" to humiliate Titania and, with the help of this "tool," Oberon realizes the distinction between real love and love induced by magic. Here is where we begin to see what the play within the play is all about. The lower-class players are as deeply confused about dramatic illusion as the upper-class lovers had been about their real feelings, which, thanks to the magical manipulations of Oberon and Puck, they are finally able to recognize.

Contrast is one of the most present characteristic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it is emphasized by Titania and Bottom, two of the figures less compatible with each other. What it makes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* so charming is the fact that it has so many dramatic illusions. The concept of true love, as presented in the story, is an illusion because the relationships within the play are magically determined to experience false love. The play presents the notion that what is considered true love is often not love at all but selfishness or infatuation.

A Midsummer Night's Dream introduces the idea that people's feelings can be induced by magic and moonlight so they cannot tell the difference between illusion and reality. It was intended as a joyous comedy, most likely to celebrate a court wedding, and the emphasis is fun,

demands that her hand shall be given in marriage only to the one who shall choose the right one among three caskets arranged in accordance with his plan. She lives in anxiety under this obligation of having a husband upon his father's plan, which seems to her only a strange form of chance. Suitors have come and have gone, some refusing to take the risk of loss and leaving without making any choice. Others have chosen wrongly and have been condemned to bitter disappointment and perpetual celibacy. Bassanio, however, who had previously come to Belmont, had already made a very favorable impression on both Nerissa and Portia, who remembers him worthy of praise. Bassanio, even before the expedition equipped by Antonio, is an acceptable suitor for the hand of Portia.

The inscriptions upon the caskets are marked with particular significance and are the direct result of the basic ideas upon which this play rests. When the Prince of Morocco came to choose, he was caught by the inscription on the golden casket, which bears this inscription "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire"¹(2.7.5). In his argument before choosing, he showed clearly that what he desired was the great wealth of Portia, as symbolized by the golden casket. Instead of what he expected, he found only a coffin and a written scroll that reminded him that he had been guided by avarice to choose for fortune. A little better was the choice of the Prince of Aragon, who was taken by the inscription on the silver casket: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." (2.7.7). Then, in his arrogant pride, he felt sure that it was he who deserved the noble Portia and he opened the silver casket only to find "the portrait of a blinking idiot" (2.9.3) to suggest to him his true worth.

Bassanio, however, who had already won the love of Portia, came with a different reason and chose the leaden casket with the inscription: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." (2.7.5) His love for Portia was so true and so intense that he was willing to risk all to win her. The pure love he had for her made him the only one worthy of her. He could not lose on these conditions, for the inscriptions were of such a character that the false must lose and the true must win. Despite Portia's worries, there was no accident about the choice, but it was the result of a moral necessity. The ingenious scheme of her father was vindicated and Bassanio became the happy husband of the lovely Portia. The inscriptions on the caskets were so ingeniously

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Irving: Sparklesoup Studios, Inc., 2004), p. 28. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

but to prejudices and accidental differences. Lorenzo declares about Jessica, “And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true, / And true she is, as she hath prov’d herself” (II. vi. 54–5). In cutting herself off from her father, Jessica also divorces herself from her Jewish ancestry. When she leaves her father’s house, Gratiano says, ‘Now (by my hood) a gentle, and no Jew’ (II. vi. 51). She escapes from her father’s house dressed as a page and is aware of her behavior, “For I am much asham’d of my exchange” (II. vi. 35).

In Act III, the audience witnesses a joking discussion between Shylock’s servant, Launcelot, and Lorenzo and Jessica about their mixed marriage, expressing the fact that Lorenzo doesn’t mind that Jessica was a Jew,

Jessica: Nay, you need not fear us Lorenzo, Launcelot and I are out, – he tells me flatly that there’s no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew’s daughter: and he says that you are no good member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price of pork. Lorenzo: I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro’s belly: the Moor is with child by you Launcelot!

Launcelot: It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for. (III. v. 28–39)

The author Emma Smith states the similarities between Portia and Nerrisa, saying that both of them break the constraints of gender, which emphasizes the changing of the society in which women were restricted:

With their cross-dressing and their active pursuit of female desire, both Portia and Jessica break the constraints of gender; nevertheless, in a text dense with cultural, economic, and gender conflict, glorifying these women as the transgressive disrupters of social order may serve only to obscure the very complex nature of difference for a changing society in which racial categories developed along with changing organizations of gender. Reading Portia as the heroic, subversive female proves particularly problematic when we place her actions in relation to other categories of difference. While her ‘witty’ remarks about her suitors display a verbal acumen and forwardness typical of the unruly woman, her subversiveness is severely limited, for her strongest verbal abilities are only bent toward supporting a status quo which mandates the repulsion of aliens and outsiders.³

³ Emma Smith, *Shakespeare’s Comedies: A Guide to Criticism* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.212.