

with the theatrical conventions of the stage in order to induce the proper atmosphere and enhance the enjoyment of understanding literature easily.

Chapter 2

Women and Marriage in the Elizabethan Age: a Historical and Cultural Perspective

1. The women in society

Feminism in Shakespeare's plays was more like a joke than a serious statement. He was not preoccupied to show in his plays that he is a defender of women because he believed men and women to be equal even though the historical context still emphasized the differences between them. He did not want to make physically, intellectually or spiritually distinctions.

In the Elizabethan Age women represented a controversial topic which, in time, rose up many issues. Women were treated as inferior to men and had to obey to all male members of the family. In a society where man was dominating, women began to ask about equity and more rights starting slowly a feminist movement. Of course, their riots did not always have the effect they were expecting but at least they encouraged women to be more outspoken. Sometimes, the authorities considered their protests against bad living conditions as a rightful complaint and determined their need as deserving of charity.

For women, the standard of living was consistently lower than for men of similar class status. Many women lived in absolute poverty, received poor charity, begged, stole or traded in prostitution in order to help themselves and their families to survive.

The role of the women in society was limited to the household activity. Women were not allowed to become educated or to go to the university. They only had permission to domestic information and training in housewifery, which they would have learned from their mothers in the household. Of course, noble women were privileged and received a higher education.

The women were expected to be more concerned with their families than with themselves. They were naive and owned by their husbands, without any rights of their own. The

Personal factor also accounted for later marriage. Early marriages were attractive to the landed classes because of property settlements, family alliances, the need for male heirs, and especially for the peerage-the limited number of potential mates.

For child marriages in Elizabethan society, the Church of England bears the major responsibility, for without a license, such marriages were illegal for girls under twelve and boys under fourteen. Where clerics performing child marriages have been identified and their religious persuasions are known, they are Catholics or Anglicans, never Puritans.

To conclude, in a number of areas the customs and views of Anglicans and Puritans on marriage differ. Marriage was still regarded as almost sacramental in conservative Anglican circles, whereas Puritans treated it primarily as a covenant, using analogies of friendship, government, the church, and business partnerships, with primacy allotted to procreation over companionship or avoidance of fornication. Nevertheless, some Puritans placed more emphasis on marriage as a sexual remedy than as the means of reproduction. In contrast to the Catholic exaltation of celibacy, Elizabethan Protestants regarded married life as equally virtuous and interpreted chastity as the repression of lust and unnatural sexual desires rather than as sexual abstinence.

One of the most divisive issues on marriage was the role of parental consent and individual choice. At stake were the institution of the arranged marriage and ultimately the question of familial versus personal rights. Weddings in the upper classes were social pageants, mainly intended to reinforce the social hierarchy. Yet pressures were brought within the Protestant tradition to simplify the celebrations particularly the allied festivities rooted in social custom. The person whose spouse died faced the question of remarriage, often acute for widows. Elizabethan widows, however, were subjected to intense pressure that made the question of remarriage more complex than the ability to withstand sexual drives. In all three areas – parental consent, weddings, and remarriage – the Anglicans and the Puritans came into conflict with the practices of a property-oriented society.

Weddings were one of three great social spectacles used by the monied and landed classes to reinforce social order through pageantry. Weddings, christenings and funerals reflected status in the divinely ordained hierarchy. Once the contract was made it was thought that a wedding should not be deferred excessively. The social customs of the engagement banquet and laying the engaged couple together were unsuitable. Weddings must be performed in churches

The Merry Wives of Windsor, where the very title of the play indicates the importance of marriage, or, to a lesser extent, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, in each of which a marital relationship plays a central part.”³

Marriage is portrayed in several different ways in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is first seen as a risky business adventure, because even though Portia and Bassanio get to love each other, Bassanio wants her hand mostly because of her money that could help him pay his debts. So he talks with his friend Antonio and confesses about his plan. According to Penny Gay, “The play begins with Antonio: he is ‘sad’, and neither he nor his friends can articulate why this is so – to the assertion ‘Why then, you are in love’, he simply answers ‘Fie, fie!’ Yet when Bassanio arrives, and they are alone on stage, it is clear that Antonio has been waiting to hear of Bassanio’s plans to woo Portia for her hand in marriage. It is not difficult to read a love-triangle here: Antonio is a rich older man, besotted with Bassanio, to whom he has already given much; Bassanio has now decided that he can do even better by marrying an heiress. The language in which this lover describes his lady – classical metaphors of fortune hunting heroes mixed with the terms of modern commerce – indicates exactly.”⁴ 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. We have as example Lorenzo and Jessica, who plan to run away together in order to escape Jessica from her father’s control. The religious differences are not an obstacle for the two of them, because Jessica makes her own rules and becomes a Christian. She would rather run away from her home that is like a hell for her, than to remain with her father. She is conscious of her behaviour and she is ashamed of her crossdressed garb, and of her exchange of faith and community she has lived in. For the moment her new role is guaranteed only by the ducats with which she gilds herself, thereby joining the transactions between identity and materiality that all characters in the play try to negotiate to their advantage.

The defeat of Shylock and the conversion of Jessica through marriage to Lorenzo might likewise appear to be a victory of provincialism over cosmopolitanism. Shakespeare highlights in the trial scene Jessica’s marriage to Lorenzo and her admission to the upper class of aristocratic

³ Emma Smith *A guide to Criticism: Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Bodmin: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.36.

⁴ ” Penny Gay, *Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Comedies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.50.

Chapter 4

Real and Illusive Love and Marriages in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

4.1 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: fantasy and reality

There is a strong relationship between fantasy and reality in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* due to the ideas of imagination, dreams, and the illusions of love that fusion with reality. It is a play about lovers, including madness and magic. The title itself tells us about the inevitable confusion that is to come, as in Elizabethan times *A Midsummer Night* was a festival linked with chaos; and the fact that it is a dream gives rise to ideas of illusion and fantasy.

Love is an important theme in the play and, whether it is true love or induced by magic, it inhibits people's ability to distinguish between what is real or simply an illusion. Love occurs in different shapes and we shall see how it varies from true love to false love, showing love's blindness and its inconstancy. It is so dazzling that the reader has to suspend reality and ask himself whether the story too is an illusion.

Love is a character in itself and it drives the couples to take unconscious decisions, but it can also be said that love within the play is in no way true or faithful to what is realistic once the characters enter the world of magic. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a cheerful comedy in which particular characters fight for their love, follow it wherever it goes and, in some cases, they even use special resources to distribute love to others after their own will.

Marriage in this play works as a social contract where women are subordinated to man. The entire play is centered around the idea of marriage, and, in fact, it ends with a triple marriage. From the beginning we are introduced into the preparations of the wedding between Theseus and Hippolyta that is to take place because Theseus has won her in battle, and, therefore, he wants to make her his wife. Love is not brought into discussion, because she is his trophy and has to obey to him. It's helpful for the reader to understand the relationship and role of Theseus and Hippolyta. To show his leadership, Theseus went with Hercules in the land of the Amazons. The Amazons were a tribe of strong woman warriors, led by their queen Hippolyta. When Hercules

main groups of characters: the Athenians, the workmen, and the fairies, whose actions form four different plots within the play and who best present what is illusive and what is real in love and marriage.

First, there is the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. They come from two very different worlds because his world is civilized and hers is savage. Theseus discusses his right to marry the defeated Amazonian women, not as a desire of true love, but because he had won her in battle and marries her as a trophy of war. This does not show the existence of love between them.

Theseus and Hippolyta appear in the daylight at both the beginning and the end of the play's main action. The use of these characters gives a sense of importance. Athens represents the logical side of human interaction; Theseus is the ruler and Hippolyta is a warrior bride, both representing order and stability, contrasting with the uncertainty and instability of most of the play. Their reappearance in the daylight of Act IV signifies the end of the dream state and the return to rationality.

Also, there is the relationship between Oberon and Titania, which reflects another example of a complicated marriage in which the male wants to be in authority. Even if the couple appears to be coexisting peacefully together, their lack of trust and Oberon's selfish need to rule over Titania destroys any hope of true love between them. Oberon is jealous of Titania's power and tries to show his domination in a humiliating manner. That is why Oberon uses the magic flower to gain control over her in order to give him what he wants. He would have not embarrassed her like that if he really felt love for Titania, because instead of making her fall in love with an ass, he could have made her fall in love with him.

The fairy world of Oberon and Titania is connected with the human world, both being ruled by desire and the ideology of patriarchy. They control and live in a fairy paradise which sometimes is a mirror of the human society, but sometimes it is far superior to it, operating according to a different kind of reality. Shakespeare presents them in a potentially harmonious relation between the human and the natural, displaying at the same time the misunderstandings between them. The Indian boy is a subtext referring to the era's mentality. It may be a subtext of the real object of their quarrel. If Titania first says that she is keeping the Indian boy for her mother's sake and will not give him up for all of fairyland, later in order to reconcile with Oberon, she will give him up without a thought and the boy will not be mentioned any more.

Chapter 5

Romantic and Pecuniary Marriages in *The Merchant of Venice*

This play is based upon three of the most radical of the teachings of the Bible: “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24), “He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew: 10:39), “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans: 13:10) Presentiment, intuition and superstition are related to the central ideas, while opinion and prejudice are introduced with rare art into this play, which opens with a statement freighted with presentiment.

The theme of the play is derived in the first instance from the Caskets Story and consists in Bassanio's pursuit of the love of Portia, equipped with the help of his best friend, Antonio. The love of Antonio for Bassanio supplies the situation that starts the first conflict of the drama. This same friendliness, however, gets the merchant into conflict with the Jew. Then in turn the happy culmination of Bassanio's love affair supplies Antonio with the legal skill of his friend's wife, by which he escapes the wickedness of Shylock. In the last act there is a return to the original theme of the play, and Bassanio is allowed through his wife's fortune to repay the debt to his faithful friend, Antonio.

The play begins with Antonio, who is sad, and neither he, nor his friends can explain the reason for it. His friends first think that he is depressed because of his cargo ship and admit that they would also be worried, if they had such ships on the seas. But Antonio is not sad about that, because his financial situation is good enough and would still have money, if his boats were to sink. Salarino tries to comfort him saying that his ships are so imposing comparing to other ships and he should not worry about that. Antonio's cousin, Bassanio, appears with his friends Lorenzo and Gratiano, and Salarino and Solanio decide to leave Antonio in their company as long as they did not succeed to cheer him up. Gratiano holds Antonio a speech trying to determine him to live his life merrily. When Antonio is told that he is in love, he simply answers “Fie, fie!” (I.1.49)

Undoubtedly, from the first act we get familiar with the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio, who would do anything for each other. We find that Bassanio is in big debts especially to Antonio and he thinks to have found a solution to gain a lot of money, but first he needs a loan. He plans to woo the hand of a rich lady from Belmont, whose dead father left her a big fortune. Antonio does not question his decision as long as it is honorable and he would start

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, 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.

and happiness of Lorenzo and his lovely Jessica, and the beautiful comedy of the rings reveals the noble part of Portia in the rescue of Antonio. Nothing could have served more admirably to increase Bassanio's love for Portia, or to assure him that their love is reciprocal. The element of romance in their love has been absorbed into the great reality of complete devotion. Their love has been tested and been found true.

The Trial Scene, deservedly one of the most popular in Shakespeare, is also one of the deepest and fullest in meaning. Into this scene, the dramatist has condensed all his thought on the great contest of Christianity and Judaism, which through all the centuries has remained unsettled. It is needless to say that Shakespeare does not treat these religions as dogmatic systems of theology, with which a dramatist has nothing to do, but as practical advice or codes of moral principles. His interest is in their moral and spiritual values.

The Merchant of Venice is primarily the story of Antonio and his friends; it was necessary for the dramatist to present clearly the completed love of Bassanio and Portia that had been the means of the triumph of Antonio in the Trial Scene. In bringing the two stories of the Caskets and the Bond, the dramatist had undertaken to work out a better and larger purpose for love than was contained in the old story. In the fourth act, love had triumphed in Portia's deliverance of Antonio, and with the close of this act the play passed beyond the point of highest passion. But the beautiful and harmonious fifth act has necessarily completed the meaning of the play as a whole, by depicting the culmination of all the love stories of the earlier part.

This happy culmination of all the stories of the play seems to be an attempt of the dramatist to depict his conception that love is the true and, indeed, the only reconciler of all our human conflicts. Love has solved all the conflicts of the play. The love of Bassanio and Portia and their united love for Antonio, on the one hand, and the love of Lorenzo and Jessica, on the other, suggest that all such conflicts may be reconciled under the sweet and holy influences of love. Many of the differences among men are due to misunderstandings, not to inherent antagonisms, and may be overcome by love. This conclusion of the play presents a full and final solution of the conflict of the drama.

The Merchant of Venice ends not with a wedding or the blessing of the bridal bed, but with the exchange of rings and the evocation of adultery. Marriage is not a romantic affair in the play, because here all of the marriages exist for convenience or necessity. Romance can follow, but it is not a requirement; that is why partners seem ready to forgive each other. The ring