Feminine Identities in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1. Introduction

“Woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man.”

This statement by the Scottish protestant leader John Knox in *The First Blast of the Trumpet* shows the role that Elizabethan women were expected to fulfil. Women in the Elizabethan era and therefore in the time when Shakespeare wrote his plays were subservient to men and had no will and choice of their own. As they were not allowed to go to school and enter university, they remained completely dependent on their male relatives, believing that they were inferior to them and thus following their will. This included that marriages were usually arranged by a powerful male relative instead of giving the woman the opportunity of choosing a husband that she loved. It is therefore no wonder that Shakespeare depicted women in a role that was completely normal and familiar to him, i.e. subservient to and completely dependent on men, and in this essay I will try to show that that is the case in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I will focus on two major female characters, Hermia and Helena, in order to gain knowledge about their relationship to men and their own identities, personalities and relationship.

2. Hermia

Hermia is the daughter of Egeus, an Athenian nobleman and is promised to marry a man named Demetrius. Unfortunately, she is not in love with Demetrius but with another man called Lysander and is thus not willing to marry the former. When having a closer look at the first act, it becomes already quite clear what role women are expected to fulfil in the play:

> Theseus: What say you, Hermia? be advised, fair maid: To you your father should be as a God; One that composed your beauties, yea and one To whom you are but as a form in wax By him imprinted but within his power To leave the figure or disfigure it. (1.1.46-51)

This statement by Theseus shows that women have no rights at all in the male world of Athens. She is her father's possession, “a form in wax” and “by him imprinted but within his power”, which means that she is neither allowed to develop her own interests nor to speak her mind. Instead, she has to obey her father, who “should be as a God” to her. Egeus emphasises this statement: “And she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius” (1.1.97-98). Hermia is therefore perceived as her father's possession rather than an individual with free choice and will, and is thus not allowed to choose the one she loves.
but has to follow her father’s choice -- which is not Lysander but Demetrius. If she followed her father’s will, though, a *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would be a fairly short play, as Hermia would marry Demetrius and the whole plot would not be able to develop. Therefore, Hermia must have a will of her own and also the courage to disobey her father. This becomes obvious in 1.1.52-53:

**Theseus:** [...] Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.
**Hermia:** So is Lysander.

In this passage, Hermia contradicts the Duke of Athens, shows that she has her own will and is ready to fight for Lysander. In the following speech, she even dares to speak her mind in front of Theseus:

**Hermia:** I do entreat your Grace to pardon me.
I know not by what power I am made bold,
Nor how it may concern my modesty,
In such a presence here to plead my thoughts.
(1.1.58-61)

Hermia seems to know what is expected from her, that means obeying her father’s will and not speaking her mind, yet she dares to refuse and “plead[s] [her] thoughts.” This shows that Hermia is not willing to fulfil her role as the loving daughter who is shaped by her father and follows his orders regardless of their consequences. One has to be aware of the fact, though, that the statement above also shows that Hermia seems to have a bad conscience and feeling of guilt, as she does not know “by what power [she is] made bold” to speak her mind, especially in front of such a powerful man as Theseus. Hermia is thus able to contradict her father and the manly world, but seems still dominated by it. Yet her love for Lysander is stronger than her subordination to her father and this is why she agrees to run away with him and marry him secretly:

**Lysander:** A good persuasion, therefore, hear me, Hermia.
I have a widow aunt, a dowager [...] From Athens is her house remote seven leagues; [...] There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee; [...] My good Lysander!
I swear to thee, by Cupid’s strongest bow, [...] In that same place thou hast appointed me, To-morrow truly will I meet with thee.
(1.1.156-57, 159, 161, 168-69, 177-78)

This interaction between Hermia and Lysander clearly shows that Hermia is strong enough to run away with Lysander without a slight feeling of hesitation. However, it is well worth considering that Hermia, although she disobeys her father’s will and escapes subordination and dependence on her father, she is still not able to be fully independent as an individual. This is due to the fact that she is now completely dependent on Lysander (“thou hast
appointed me”), i.e. again a man, whose proposal she is following without a second thought. It is thus a fact that Hermia is a courageous woman but is not able to escape the conventions that prevent her from developing to an independent individual.

3. Helena

Helena is the daughter of Nedar and Hermia’s childhood friend, as one can conclude from Hermia’s words in the following passage: “And in the wood, where often you [Helena] and I / Upon faint primrose-beds wont to lie / […] Farewell, sweet playfellow: pray thou for us” (1.1.214-15, 220). As Hermia addresses Helena as her “sweet playfellow” and remembers old days “in the wood" where often they "wont to lie”, it is obvious that Helena and Hermia must have known each other for quite a long time, i.e. since they were children. Helena is in love with Demetrius, the man whom Hermia’s father wants to marry his daughter. Unfortunately, Demetrius is not interested in Helena but has only eyes for Hermia, whom he loves dearly. However, as has already been discussed above, Hermia is in love with Lysander and tries everything to tell Demetrius that she does not love him. This becomes obvious in the following passage:

Hermia: I frown upon him [Demetrius], yet he loves me still.
Helena: The more I hate, the more he follows me.

(1.1.194, 198-99)

This short dialogue between Hermia and Helena shows that Helena is deeply in love with Demetrius but that he hates her. Instead, he follows Hermia and “[t]he more [she] hate[s] [him], the more he follows [her]” and does not seem to understand that Hermia loves Lysander and is not interested in him. The symmetry in their verse lines seems to emphasize the young women’s parallel situations. Helena is not willing to accept this and pursues Demetrius, although he tells her over and over again that he does not love her: “I [Demetrius] love thee [Helena] not, therefore pursue me not” (2.1.188). This fact, i.e. that Helena does not understand that Demetrius is not in love with her and follows him around all the time, indicates that she has very little self-confidence and is completely dependent on him. This becomes very obvious in the following passage:

Demetrius: Do I entice you? do I speak you fair?
Or, rather, do I not in plainest truth
Tell you, I do not nor I cannot love you?

Helena: And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel; and; Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you:
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
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?

(2.1.199-210)

Although Demetrius clearly tells her to leave him alone and that he “[does] not nor [he] cannot love [her]”, Helena “even for that do[es] […] love [him] the more.” This clearly shows how much Helena is ready to submit herself to Lysander and his subordination. She loves him so much that she is even ready to be treated and “used as [he] uses his dog”, in order to get the slightest bit of attention from him. This shows that Helena’s self-confidence is so low that she does not have any pride left at all, is “[u]nworthy” and thus willing to humiliate herself just for the sake of someone else. Demetrius is therefore allowed to do with her what he wants, “[…] spurn [her], strike [her], neglect [her], lose [her] […],” and Helena would never dare to complain. She therefore does not consider herself as independent human individual that has the right to be treated with respect and love, even thinks that she is “[…] as ugly as a bear/For beasts that meet [her] run away for fear” (2.2.100-01). Helena thus fulfils the role women are expected to play, i.e. subordinating themselves completely to male subordination.

4. The Relationship between Hermia and Helena

As I explained above, we know that Hermia and Helena have known each other since childhood and have been friends ever since. It is now important to analyse how both women are interacting with each other throughout the play in order to gain more knowledge about their personalities. From the knowledge attained in the two previous sections, we are aware of the fact that Hermia is dearly loved by both Demetrius and Lysander, while Helena follows Demetrius like a dog and tries to get attention from him. Considering this and human nature, it seems likely that Helena, who already has quite a low self-confidence, may be jealous of Hermia. This becomes obvious in the following passage:

Hermia: Good speed fair Helena! whither away?
Helena: Call you me fair? that fair again unsay.
Demetrius loves you fair: O happy fair!

(1.1.180-82)

This short dialogue between Hermia and Helena reveals many important features that characterise Hermia, Helena and their relationship. It is quite obvious that Hermia does not see Helena’s struggle with herself, Demetrius and the world around her, as she calls her “fair Helena”, which proves that Hermia sees Helena in an objective way. She definitely thinks that Helena is fair and tells her so. As Helena has a very low opinion of herself, she rejects to be addressed in this way and even seems to accuse Hermia of telling her to be fair: “Call you me fair?”, i.e. How dare you to call me fair while Demetrius is in love with you, not with me, “Demetrius loves you fair […].” This already indicates Helena’s jealousy which Hermia obviously does not see. Her subliminal accusation and jealousy continues, as can be seen in the following passage:

Helena: The more I love, the more [Demetrius] hateth me.
Hermia: His folly, Helena, is no fault of mine.
Helena: None, but your beauty: would that fault were mine!

Here, Hermia seems to recognise that Helena thinks that Hermia is the reason why Demetrius rejects her, as she tells her that “[h]is folly […] is no fault of [hers].” She therefore tries to defend herself and seems to understand Helena’s subliminal accusations. Helena’s answer shows again how jealous she is of Hermia and that she holds her responsible for her unhappiness: “None, but your beauty: would that fault were mine!” In addition, this statement also shows that Helena would give everything just to be like Hermia and be in her place instead. Helena’s jealousy is quite problematic if we consider it in terms of friendship, because it destroys love, trust and respect between two human beings. In the course of the play, this becomes quite clear, as Hermia continues to trust Helena and tells her that she is going to steal away in order to marry Lysander in the woods: “Take comfort: he [Demetrius] no more shall see my face/Lysander and myself will fly this place” (1.1.202-3). It is no coincidence that it is exactly “the wood, where often you [Helena] and I [Hermia] / Upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie” that will be Lysander and Hermia’s place of their secret wedding, as it has a great deal of importance for Helena’s and Hermia’s friendship. As Hermia confides in Helena and tells her that she is going to run away with Lysander, she shows how much she trusts her friend. However, as has been argued before, jealousy destroys trust, respect and love, and this holds also true for Helena. Instead of keeping Hermia’s secret, she decides to betray her and tell Demetrius about the secret wedding:

Helena: How happy some o’er other some can be!
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she [Hermia].
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so;
He will not know what all but he do know […]
For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia’s eyne,
He hail’d down oaths that he was mine
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt
I will go tell him of fair Hermia’s flight:
Then to the wood will he to-morrow night
Pursue her; and for this intelligence
If I have thanks, it is a dear expense.

(1.1.226-29, 242-49)

Helena’s speech again shows many important facts: first of all, she cannot bear to see Hermia and Lysander happy together and pitying her: “How happy some o’er other some can be!” Furthermore, we also learn that Helena is a very fair woman but that she is not interested at all in what others are saying, it is Demetrius who she wants to think her fair. In addition, it becomes clear that Demetrius must have been in love with her before, as “he hailed down oaths that he was [Helena’s]” but that it was Hermia’s fault that he changed his mind: “And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt / So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.” Helena has therefore been hurt by Hermia in a very cruel way: Hermia stole her lover without being aware of it or wanting it, as she is in love with Lysander. However,
Helena is not angry with Demetrius, whom she should condemn as he has left her and does not treat her respectfully anymore, but with Hermia. Due to this fact, she is eager to destroy Hermia’s happiness and desperately tries to win Demetrius’ attention back, as she would do everything in order to get the tiniest bit of attention from him: “[...] and for this intelligence / If I have thanks, it is a dear expense.” Helena therefore seems to recognise that it is a high price that she pays with betraying her friend, as it is “a dear expense”, but that she is well aware of the fact that even only thanks from Demetrius are more important to her than Hermia’s friendship. While doing this, she does not realize that it is Hermia who trusts her and is a loyal friend and that it is Demetrius who steals her every last bit of self-confidence and pride.

5. Conclusion
To sum up these observations, it has become obvious that Hermia and Helena in A Midsummer Night’s Dream are expected to subject themselves to male authority. Helena, especially, fulfils the role of the dependent, obedient woman who does not have a will of her own and humiliates herself just for the sake of male attention. However, this is of course not only a subjection because of social circumstances, but also because of unreturned love and Helena’s obsession with Demetrius. Therefore, we cannot assume that social roles are the reason for everything that happens between the major characters of the play as Helena’s jealousy and insecurity are natural, quite powerful human emotions that have nothing to do with gender roles. Shakespeare may be suggesting that subjection and insecurity both cause many problems which women may not be able to solve.

Bibliography

