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Lovely Weather for A Wedding
Marriage in Shakespeare Plays

by Nicole Dominguez

(English 2228)

In nearly all of Shakespeare's plays, there is a marriage. Whether it's the presence of a married couple or two people who will be wed, it is a common theme in his works, especially in his comedies. Yet, the playwright adopts individualized approaches to each of the marriages in *As You Like It*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Hamlet*, highlighting defining points of the characters, while revealing his own understanding of the concept.

Marriage is as a central theme that propels the action in most of Shakespeare's comedies. In terms of *Midsummer Night's Dream* the action is propelled by the *avoidance* of a marriage. Hermia is denied the right to marry the one she loves by her father, Egeus, and Theseus, the Duke of Athens, resulting in Hermia and her lover, Lysander, running away, with Helena and Demetrius following, creating chaos. The subplot of the play is also driven by this, with Oberon and Titania's tumultuous marriage, spurring Oberon to meddle with the couples, and tricking Titania to fall in love with Bottom. Without the presence of marriage, either through conflict within it or through its avoidance, the plot of the play would not exist. In terms of the play *As You Like it*, the plot is not driven by a marriage or the need for a wedding, but the central and minor conflicts are all rectified by the marriage of the opposing characters.

As an example, Oliver and Orlando in *As You Like It* give proof of their reconciliation by both getting married, along with Phoebe and Silvius, and Touchstone and Audrey. In the same way, the conflict in *Midsummer Night's Dream* is resolved with the triple wedding of Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, and Theseus and Hippolyta, and with Oberon and Titania making amends. Through how it's represented in its comedies, Shakespeare sees marriage as a tool for healing and the promise of a brighter future.

In contrast, just as he uses marriage as resolution in his comedies, Shakespeare presents marriage as the catalyst for conflict in his tragedies (Hopkins). A prime example of this is in *Hamlet*. Following the death of Hamlet's father, and his removal from the line of succession, the marriage of his mother Gertrude to his uncle Claudius is Hamlet's breaking point, arguably the final act that sends him spiralling into madness. In Act 3 Scene 4, Hamlet condemns his mother for her hasty marriage, saying: "Such an act|That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,| Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose| From the fair forehead of an innocent love| And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows| As false as dicers' oaths" (OpenSourceShakespeare.org). In this speech Hamlet accuses his mother of violating the sanctity of marriage, and love itself, by marrying so quickly after the death of her husband, not only to her brother in law, but to the man Hamlet suspects murdered his father. In his comedies, Shakespeare uses marriage as an easy, even flippant, means to resolve conflict and arguably sees it as a disposable remedy without depth or meaning. On the surface, Shakespeare's tragedies use marriage as a means of political or emotional manipulation such as in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but through dialogue like Hamlet's speech above, we see the playwright cautioning the audience against violating the sanctity of marriage.

Shakespeare reveals the complexity of his opinions on marriage, not only through the action, but through the characters themselves. The reasons for Gertrude's second marriage is left up to interpretation: She could have married Claudius out of fear of being a widow, out of lust, or out of a

desire to maintaining her title of Queen, either way, Gertrude married by choice. She later acknowledges that “I doubt it is no other but the main:| His father’s death and our o’erhasty marriage.” (Act 2 Scene 2). Gertrude knows her decision to marry was the final straw for Hamlet, thus causing his madness. Though this choice is hardly the main point of the play, the effects of it have impact on a major theme: Hamlet’s supposed insanity. Were Gertrude forced into marriage by Claudius, she would have admitted it in the famous “closet scene” giving Hamlet, and the audience, greater insight, perhaps even allowing Gertrude forgiveness for the marriage; however, the text gives no indication that her marriage was anything but a conscious choice, doubling Hamlet’s feelings of betrayal. Queen Gertrude’s decision provides repercussions that expose Hamlet’s character, and propel the plot.

The concept of the female character choosing a husband based on love is more positively represented in Shakespeare’s comedies. Arranged marriage is a common sub-theme within Shakespearian plays, with the parents of the female characters trying to persuade their daughters to marry a particular man; yet, these female characters rarely wed the man chosen for them. In terms of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Egeus tries to push Hermia into marrying Demetrius, in an attempt to take her away from her lover Lysander, however Hermia refuses, saying “So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, | Ere I will my virgin patent up |Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke | My soul consents not to give sovereignty.” (Act 1 Scene 1). In the end, Hermia marries the man she loves, defying her father’s expectations and her role as a “form in wax | By him imprinted and within his power |To leave the figure or disfigure...” (Act 1 Scene 1). Because of the high expectations of parents and society, Hermia and Lysander’s, as well as Demetrius and Helena’s, choice to marry out of love and not arrangement is perceived as defiance.

In contrast, Rosalind and Orlando’s courtship and marriage is seen as a pleasant event which provides romance and entertainment. Rosalind and Orlando’s choice to marry one another does not cause the same reaction of defiance because of the lack of expectations placed on them. Due to their high positions in the royal court, it would be expected that they would be promised in marriage to people of equal or similar birth, however no such arrangements are indicated in the text, allowing relationships to be made without the restriction of parental or societal expectation. Because of this, Rosalind and Orlando’s wedlock exalts marriage of love, not as a declaration of independence, but the happy result of a humorous (if unconventional) courtship. *As You Like It* has many subplots that are focused on a couple’s walk towards marriage, such as Touchstone and Audrey, and Phebe and Silvius, each of which showing unique perceptions of marriage. Ironically, it is the male characters in these subplots that are eager for marriage, with Touchstone saying in Act 3 Scene 3 “... as a wall’d town is more worthier than a village, so| is the forehead of a married man more honourable than the bare |brow of a bachelor”, presenting marriage, through comical exaggeration, as a privilege. In the end, the couples all marry through choice and dramatic love: “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (Act 5, Scene 4).

For every marriage there is a courtship. As with most of his comedies, Shakespeare revolves the plot of *As You Like It* around the bazaar courtships of Touchstone and Audrey, Phebe and Silvius, and most importantly, Rosalind and Orlando. With the dramatic readings and songs the characters themselves mock, Silvius’ exalted ideas of marriage, exaggerated descriptions of one’s lover, and Rosalind’s condemnation of artificiality, the play acts as a parody to the extreme drama of chivalry and romanticism, breaking the fourth wall through its blatant address of courtly love.

Courtly love saw its height during the Middle Ages when it originated through troubadours of Provence, creating the idea of a “love service” of the knights of the crusade. The idea was “the expression of the knightly worship of a refining ideal embodied in the person of the beloved.” (Brooklyn College), such expressions were done under elaborate sets of rules and codes that regarded acts of chivalry, grand gestures of romance, and upholding moral dignity. By the time it reached England, the idea of courtly love had circulated through Europe, becoming more and more

gentrified in its representation providing “a refined and elevated language with which to describe the phenomenology of love” (Brooklyn College). When the Renaissance was born, courtly love was still used as the main language of romantic love, however now the elaborate expressions of love and chivalry had begun to become an ideal of a bygone era. As much as Shakespeare satirizes it in *As You Like It*, his representation of courtly love in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is much more respectful, if mildly playful, of the theme, pairing the common presence of faeries and magic in medieval literature, with courtly love to create an enchanted atmosphere. “No serious issue mars the comic atmosphere as we see the humorous side of love in. [this] play” (Cherry). In *Hamlet*, the courtship of Gertrude and Claudius is never mentioned or even referred to, further highlighting the unconventionality of their marriage and perhaps even implying that the lack of a necessary courtship is a major component in its suspicious dysfunctionality. Shakespeare presents that after every courtship is a happy marriage, and the lack of the proper use of courtly love foreshadows tragedy and darker secrets.

Shakespeare is enigmatic at best and self-contradictory at worst in his representations of marriage. Yet under close observation, we see that perhaps his presentation of it is closer to life than we think. Just as the stability of the marriage is dependent on the people within it, so his characters and the atmosphere of their world dictate the state of the marriage. Shakespeare’s representations, enigmatic though they seem, do have a common thread. Despite his custom of using marriage as comedic closure, he represents it as an institution for healing and reconciliation. Even within the toxic confines of a tragic marriage, Shakespeare uses that dysfunction as an example of what happens when the sanctity of marriage is violated and the importance of courtship is disregarded.

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