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English II-1

20 January 2015

Parody of the Lunacy in Shakespeare’s Women in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*

One cannot imagine the iconic Queen Elizabeth, the woman who ruled with an iron fist, would ever chase a man like a “spaniel” puppy as Shakespeare’s Helena in *Midsummer Night’s Dream.* Of the women characters in the play, it is Helena who seems to display the most erratic behavior. Helena’s behavior is a parody of how Elizabethan society thought women should behave. I believe that this is shown through the three women characters portrayed by Shakespeare: Hermia, Hippolyta, and Helena.

The first reason I believe *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a parody is that Hermia defies male authority, which includes her own father, Egeus, and Duke Theseus. In Athens, as with much of the world centuries ago, women married the men they were told to marry. For Hermia to disobey her father, means that Duke Theseus can sentence her to a nunnery or to die. Not many spoiled rich girls would want either, so she is the rebel in this play. She also would not have wanted her reputation ruined running to the forest unchaperoned; however, she does tell Lysander, “Lie further off yet, do not lie so near” (2.2), and repeats more firmly when he does not mind her, “Gentle friend, for love and courtesy, lie further off” (2.2). Although some societal conventions are shown in this play, the parody is shown of a society where women actually act on their desires.

Secondly, Hippolyta is a character who does not fit into the role Shakespeare has given her. She is an Amazon Queen, fierce in battle and not easily won. However, Theseus seems to have won her heart, even though he tells her, ‘I woo’d thee with my sword, and won thy love doing thee injuries, but I will wed the in another key” (1.1). This statement gives the impression that even though Theseus won the battle with Hippolyta, and he is marrying her because he truly loves her. One can infer that she is the one who won the battle.

Nonetheless, the third reason this play may be a parody of woman’s roles during this time period is Helena and he bizarre behavior towards winning the man she loves. She knows Demetrius is promised to her best friend Hermia, yet she pursues him even though he does not care for her. Demetrius tell Helena, “I am sick when I do look on thee” (2.1) and it does not deter her. However, Helena’s behavior masks her wise words, which is completely opposite her actions, as shown when she says that love is born from what is on the inside and not the outside. The parody shown in her character is that no woman of this time period would chase after a man, because it is the male who chooses the mate. Also, Helena does come to her senses when Lysander falls in lover with her, and she must defend her friend Hermia from the pain she has felt all along.

In conclusion, by looking at the three women characters in *Midsummer Night’s Dream,* one can see Shakespeare is making fun, through a parody of the time, of the perception of women stalking men they admire. These women are strong, fearless, and know what they want. Shakespeare highlights the intelligence of all three women, who do get what they want in the end, even though it is outside the conventions of their societal boundaries.