

Analysis of the Image of the Queens in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Qingyu Xiao^{1,*}

¹Communication University of Shanxi, Jinzhong of Shanxi province, 030619, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 1716008353@qq.com

ABSTRACT

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies. The work revolves around the love story of Hermia and Lysander, who meet a series of bizarre events when they elope into the woods to rebel against the marriage Hermia's father has arranged for Hermia. In this play, the female characters play a very important role in the story. In particular, the two queenly figures that appear in the play, characters who appear as female rulers, are important breakthroughs in the analysis of the work, the author herself and the social attitudes towards women at the time. Many scholars have previously analyzed Midsummer Night's Dream and its female characters, but the role of the queens is still one of the few. Most of these analyses have focused on Titania, but less on the other queen of the work. This essay will analyze Shakespeare's and sixteenth-century England's view of women through an analysis and comparison of the personalities and commonalities of the two queens. Through the analysis and comparison of their endings, the disembodied role of the queen and the status of women in sixteenth-century England will be analyzed about the second nature of Beauvoir and the historical material.

Keywords: *A midsummer night's dream, Feminism, Shakespeare, Theater*

1. INTRODUCTION

A Midsummer Night's Dream has been analyzed by many scholars from literary, dramaturgical, artistic and many other perspectives, and the discussion and analysis of gender have continued. Many successful works have been written on the subject of gender. However, feminism is a vast field in its own right and is a discipline with many branches, with analyses from the perspective of naturalist feminism and socialist feminism, but most other analyses of women remain in general feminism and do not go further. In this paper, we compare and contrast the similarities and differences between Hippolyta and Titania in terms of character, marriage and social relations from the perspectives of psychoanalytic feminism and existential feminism, and analyze the gender implications of their images. It also analyses the differences and similarities between the two, as well as the attitudes towards women's issues in nineteenth-century England as reflected in Shakespeare's works. This analysis provides a glimpse into the state of feminism at this stage of its development and facilitates an analysis of the history of feminism. It also provides a further understanding of Shakespeare's thinking on writing. An author cannot

write completely free of his time, whether in conformity or rebellion, and must reflect some of his time. It will be important in the study of Shakespearean literature and British historiography in the future, as well as in the study of the development of feminism prior to the twentieth century.

2. COMMONALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY OF THE QUEEN FIGURE

2.1. Commonality of women in Shakespeare's work - the commonality of identity

The two queen characters in the play differ greatly in their process of psychological independence of the female self. However, before doing so, it's better to list some of the commonalities of the characters to compare the differences in their personalities. Such an act can provide favorable aid to the subsequent, analysis of the reasons for the differences. With the unity of commonalities, it's better to compare the factors that lead to the differences.

It is very obvious that the queens have commonalities first and foremost in their identity.

Titania and Hippolyta both appeared as queens at one time or another. And, during their reigns, they both had high status. Hippolyta, in Greek mythology, was once the queen of the Amazons. In the Greek system of life, Hippolyta is portrayed as far more powerful and forceful than she is shown in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. As the daughter of the victorious Ares, she possessed a magical belt and the Amazons even attacked Athens because their queen had been cheated out of her life. Titania, on the other hand, is portrayed more in the play as a queen with her own retinue, who dominates the natural world. The fairies act under her command, and together with Oblong, she acts as the ruler of the kingdom of the gods and goddesses.

And behind the commonality of identity is the commonality of the responsibilities they carry. As queens, their capriciousness has great consequences, such as wars between the Amazons and the Athenians, the chaos of nature, etc. Their actions affect the country, Athens or Immortality. So, while they share their status as queens, their countries are also having an impact on them. And it is the difference in their countries that becomes one of the factors that cause them to be different.

2.2. The personalities of women in Shakespeare's works - differences in psychology

Compared with similarity, it seems to have more points of their difference.

There are differences in their personalities. In the play, Hippolyta has much fewer lines than Titania, and she seems more silent and submissive than Titania. Most of Hippolyta's words are pandering to Theseus, and she expresses her opinion much less often than the Faerie Queen. And in, the parts where she has more lines, in the time leading up to the opening of the play within the play, she shows a lot of, well, contempt for the commoners in her lines. In Act V, Scene I of the play, Hippolyta has lines that show her contempt for the existence of the commoners due to the disparity in status. Titania's lines portray a strong, powerful but much weaker image of hierarchy. It is also a hint, through the two queens, of the state of the two nations behind them. Athens has a more rigid hierarchical order than the Cenacle, and the queens are part of this hierarchy.

Another very interesting difference between the queens is the relationship between them and their husbands. There is a cycle between the character of the queens, the state of the country and the relationship between the queen and her husband. The queen's character reflects the state of her country, and the state of the country influences the hierarchical order of that country, and thus the relationship between the queen and the king. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir refers to the

traditional female family relationship in which the husband acts as the link between the woman and the outside world and the woman as the subordinate to her husband, the 'other'. Therefore, the more rigid the hierarchy, the more subordinate the relationship between husband and wife becomes. This is also well illustrated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hippolyta lives in Athens, where the hierarchy is more distinct, and her subordination to Theseus is even more pronounced. In Act I, Scene I, Theseus mentions that he will win Hippolyta with sword and violence. And in the less hierarchical order of the immortal kingdom, Titania as the wife can quarrel with King Oblong, and Oblong as the husband can be jealous of his wife.

3. AN EXPLORATION OF THE QUEEN'S MARRIAGE

3.1. Hippolyta and Theseus - politics? Love?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the marital status of the queens is an important part of their state of life. In her *Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes, "Marriage as a custom has enormous social significance. The conjugal relationship, even if freed from its religious significance, is very important in terms of human relations."

In the marriage relationship between Hippolyta and Theseus, Hippolyta, in the capacity of wife, becomes subordinate to the Athenian monarch Theseus. This is easy to spot when reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In the speeches at the wedding in the first scene, it is easy to see that Theseus is motivated by a stronger position in their relationship. In the first scene of the first act, Theseus's lines are expressing how he feels that the four days leading up to the wedding are very long because of its arrival, whereas Hippolyta reacts differently to the four days. Her lines reflect the fact that she considers these four days to be very short. The king and the queen have different feelings in terms of their anticipation of the wedding. The dialogue ends with Theseus telling Hippolyta that he has "won" Hippolyta's love with his sword[1].

In this marriage, Hippolyta's sense of herself as a woman is missing, and this is not only due to the strength of Tius. The marriage was not only the result of love, but politics was also a reason for their union.

Before their marriage, Hippolyte was the queen of the Amazons. She would not have been portrayed as such a vulnerable figure. This Amazonian queen is mentioned in the first scene of Act II in the quarrel between Titania and Oblong. Titania describes her as "haughty and valiant".

Before analyzing the Queen before and after her marriage, a brief analysis of the image of Theseus is

needed. In the play, Theseus is first and foremost a powerful and terrifying monarch, an unquestionable figure of superiority. At the same time, he is also portrayed as a mercurial hero. Also in Act II, Scene 1, Titania's lines mention that Theseus is a very popular figure with women, that he has many lovers and that he can leave them behind very easily to find another lover.

From this, it can be concluded that love and marriage were not primary to Theseus, but rather a pastime in a life of power. In this state, Hippolyta, as queen, could only be subservient to Theseus and, as queen, her status was equally political. Athens, as governed by Theseus, was a hierarchical state, and in Theseus's lines to Hermia, Athens was a well-ordered patriarchal society where the father even had the power to execute his daughter. The weakening of Hippolyta's sense of self is caused by the order of the Athenian city-state, and the weakening of the queen is the very consolidation of the Athenian order.

3.2. Titania and Oblong

On the contrary, Titania and Oblong's marital status is quite different. Their marriage seems far more egalitarian than that of Hippolyte and Theseus, and Titania has a much stronger sense of self. She is much less dependent on Oblong. She has her own work and duties, her own social ties outside of the marital relationship, and in comparison to Hippolyte, Titania is portrayed a little like a recent woman who has entered society and taken on her social attributes. In *The Second Sex*, it is argued that the character of the working woman is that she breaks the phenomenon of the husband as the only channel through which the wife is connected to society, and that the woman can no longer approach society through her husband, but directly. Although the emergence of the working woman was centuries after Shakespeare's time, there are similarities between the Titania figure and the working woman.

The most essential difference between Titania's and Hippolyta's characterization also lies in this. The state of their existence depends in large part on their marital status, which is influenced by the social group in which they live. The issue of marriage is a very important part of women's issues, and marriage customs are often shaped by the state of the society in which they live.

However, after analyzing the differences between the two queen figures, and their marital status. What remains of interest are the commonalities in the outcome of the two. Hippolyta is a representative of a woman without independent social ties and dependent on men; Titania as a representative of a woman with her own social ties and a greater sense of equality. The two end up with very different outcomes. Hippolyta ends by being dependent on Theseus, while Titania ends by becoming dependent on King Oblong. This is reflected

in Titania's disembodied and final pageant relationship after the effects of the love-lazy flower juice have worn off.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir has argued that the hostess's quest for the feast has something to do with her self-objectification. At the feast, women tend to ensure that their dresses are not contaminated more than they ensure that the food on the table is faulty, an act that stems from their fear of being exposed to social danger[2]. During the feast, she is constantly ensuring that nothing goes wrong with her groomed dress so as not to expose herself to social embarrassment.

This state of affairs is consistent with the one Hippolyta displayed at the banquet on the eve of her wedding. What Hippolyta did at the dinner before the wedding party was precisely to maintain her dignified, elegant image as a symbol of a regal queen at the party.

4. SOME EXPLORATIONS OF THE IMAGE OF THE QUEEN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERIOD

A Midsummer Night's Dream was first performed in 1592, during the latter part of Elizabeth I's reign. Elizabeth I was the last of the Tudor monarchs and one of the most famous female rulers in English history. Her reign is known to historians as the Golden Age. It was a time of political stability and economic prosperity, which led to a thriving theatre market in England at the time.

Under Elizabeth I, one of the most celebrated female emperors in British history, some measures were taken to advance the status of women. For example, Elizabeth I selected women of outstanding political ability to participate directly in the centers of political power as her consort, established a fund for women's education, and promoted women's education and emancipation.

However, under Elizabeth I, these measures did not really change the status of women in England. According to a study of marriage customs in the Elizabethan period, women had no autonomy in marriage under Elizabeth I[3]. Men chose their wives by looking at portraits of women, while women did not even know what their husbands looked like until their wedding day, girls were taught from an early age that women were inferior to men, and women who did not marry were often seen as a disgrace to their families. This tended to happen in the aristocracy and upper classes, with lower and middle-class women even having a greater say in their marriages.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discusses the relationship between the appearance of the queen and the status of women, arguing that the appearance of the queen had no necessary bearing on the status of women at the time, but that the queen was a special case of

femininity, and that her identity was more significant than her gender[2]. However, this is not an accurate conclusion in light of the reality of the situation.

The fact is that the emergence of female rulers tends to be accompanied by measures to improve the status of women. Contrast the three female emperors of the world, East and West. Elizabeth I of England, Ekaterina II of Russia, and Wu Zetian, the empress of the Tang Dynasty of China. It can be seen that even out of different historical periods and under different historical conditions, female rulers have always made some effort to improve the status of women[4].

In Russia, during the reign of Ekaterina II, the Smolny Girls' School was opened in May 1764 as the beginning of educational reform for Russian girls. In 1786, the Statute of the National School of Education was enacted, the first legislation on national education in Russia. The statute established the National School programme, which allowed girls to attend the National School[5].

During the Tang Dynasty, Wu Zetian took some measures, such as the mourning of both parents, the popularisation of women's education, and the establishment of women's political groups, with Shangguan Wan'er and Princess Taiping as the main representatives. More importantly, women were given the right to choose their own spouses and the right to divorce.

All three women rulers had measures to improve the status of women, but the results were very different. The status of women in Britain and Russia also improved, but not nearly as much as it did in China during the Tang dynasty. This is because the women's reforms of Wu Zetian during the Tang dynasty touched on marriage in a way that neither Elizabeth I nor Ekaterina II did.

The rise in the status of marriage was an important manifestation of the status of women[6]. For the exploration of women's status, the marriage relationship is the most important relationship in a woman's life when she is not directly connected to society. This is an important aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, comparing the marital status of the two queens.

The different states of affairs presented by the queens in the play are reflected, above all, in their marital relationships. However, the consistency of their endings is a reflection of the status of women in English society at the time. Shakespeare's work is a side-by-side expression of the attitudes of the public towards women's issues at the time.

5. CONCLUSION

The above is the author's study of the two female figures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Comparing the differences between the two queens' images, it is easy to see that both of them have different degrees of awakening in the female psyche, which is also a reflection of sixteenth-century England. However, the convergence of their endings is not unrelated to the aesthetics of women in society at the time. Elizabethan England had seen some improvement in the status of women, but it was still limited by history. Things do not always develop at once, but in a slow process. The same is true of feminist development, which is not an issue that emerges overnight, but one that has been suppressed for a long time. The hidden problems can only be seen by exploring the characteristics of each stage in each era, in the context of history and cultural development.

In this essay, the volume of the essay is limited to an analysis of the two queens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but there are many works by Shakespeare that are more reflective of the author's view of women, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, which flirts with the women of the aristocracy and can be more reflective of Shakespeare's view of women. Although the image of the Queen is a breakthrough in the study of women, it also has certain limitations, as Shakespeare's works are numerous and include descriptions of women of all classes, ages and personalities. This is not enough space to analyse them all, and if they were all put together it would be very easy to miss something important. Therefore, further analysis of Shakespeare's female characters is still needed, and this is one of the goals of future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Professor Peter Swaab of ucl for his understanding of the characteristics of Shakespeare's works and the concept of drama, and to Ms Jiang Nan for her guidance on this paper, which has provided me with much direction. I would like to thank my school, Shanxi Media College, and Mr. Shi Tanyu for their help, guidance and inspiration in the process of thinking about this topic, and Huang Yufan for her guidance and revision of the thesis.

REFERENCES

- [1] William Shakespeare (1699) *A mid-summer night's dream*.folger Shakespeare Library.
- [2] Simone de Beauvoir (2014) *The Second Sex*. Shanghai Translation Press. Shanghai.
- [3] Chuangyu Zhu (2014) An examination of Empress Ekaterina II's educational reforms for women. *Russian Studies*, 189.150-171

- [4] Zhao Chunmei (2019) Women's education in Russia before the outbreak of the women's movement, *Educational Life Forum*, 4, 111-115
- [5] Fang Hu (2013) Elizabeth I in the light of feminism. *Literary Education*. 9, 128-129
- [6] Nie Haiyan (2021) A study of Elizabethan marriage customs. *World Cultures*. 38-39