

Feminist Interpretation of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the masterpieces of the famous British dramatist, Shakespeare, and the most famous work among his “Four Comedies.” The work was created during the humanist period of the 15th and 16th centuries in Britain. The characters in the work are three-dimensional and their lines are exquisite and deep. This work also has a strong feminist color. This article starts with a brief introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, followed by an explanation of feminism and the internal relationship between feminism and humanism. Lastly, the heroine, Hermia, is analyzed from a feminist perspective, about how she broke through the exploitation and restrictions of women and realized her ideals and values of life.

Keywords: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Hermia; Feminism; Shakespeare

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1. Summary of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*

1.1. A brief introduction to the work

William Shakespeare, a famous playwright in the English Renaissance, has written many great works that reflect the social phenomenon and reveal the nature of reality at that time. In his works, he depicts various characters who have different personalities but are equally vivid and captivating, promoting humanism—a central theme of the Renaissance. The female characters in Shakespeare's four great romantic comedies are archetypes of the evolving women's roles in the Renaissance. They possess both wisdom and beauty, courage and kindness, attracting readers from generation to generation with their unique charm^[1].

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy that embodies the Renaissance spirit and humanistic ideas. Although the story in the play takes place in the ancient Greek era, the characters' thoughts, feelings, and moral standards are completely based on real life in Britain in the 15th and 16th centuries. In the play, Shakespeare passionately depicts the struggle of new bourgeois women as they strive for the freedom to love and exercise marital autonomy while resisting patriarchal norms. Through the contrast between reality and nature, he expresses the humanistic concept of equal coexistence between people and harmonious coexistence between man and nature – an idealistic doctrine.

1.2. A summary of the story

The story takes place in Athens, the capital of ancient Greece, a place full of mystery and magic. In this city, there was a noble girl named Hermia. Her beauty and intelligence gave her a high reputation in Athenian society. However, Hermia's father, a serious and determined nobleman, decided to marry her to a promising young man named Demetrius. Demetrius was a handsome young man from Athens whose bravery and wisdom made him highly respected in Athenian society. However, Hermia already had another young man in her heart, his name was Lysander.

Lysander was a brave and intelligent young man whose passion and tenacity made him occupy an important place in Hermia's heart. However, ancient Greek law stipulated that if a woman violated her father's will to marry, she would be sentenced to death. Even so, Hermia firmly opposed the engagement and demanded to be with Lysander. Her father believed that Hermia was being disobedient, so he took her to the Grand Duke to deal with her justly according to the law. However, fate was not cruel to Hermia. On the day of their wedding, the Grand Duke of Athens decided to exempt Hermia from the death penalty and let her choose between marrying Demetrius and remaining unmarried for life.

Hermia made her decision in pain and struggle. She decided to elope with Lysander and go to the forest not far from Athens to escape from this city full of restraint and oppression. However, Hermia's plan was not kept secret. Her good friend Helena, a kind and simple woman, also liked Demetrius. When Helena learned of Hermia and Lysander's elopement plan, she decided to tell Demetrius, hoping to gain his favor. However, this decision triggered a series of chaos and conflicts.

Demetrius and Helena decided to track Hermia and Lysander, and they came to a mysterious forest. This forest was not peaceful, it was the residence of a race of elves. The Fairy King and Fairy Queen of the elves had a falling out because of a quarrel. In order to take revenge on the Fairy Queen, the Fairy King decided to use a magic called "Love Lazy Flower." The juice of this flower can make people fall in love. No matter whether they are men or women, as long as it is dropped on the eyelids of a sleeping person, they will fall madly in love with whatever creature they see when they wake up.

The Fairy King planned to embarrass the Fairy Queen by having her fairies smear this flower juice on her eyelids so that she would fall in love with the animals around her when she woke up. However, after overhearing the conversation between Helena and Demetrius, the fairy sympathized with Helena's plight and decided to help her with the flower juice. However, the fairy's plan did not go as expected. He accidentally dropped the flower juice on the eyelids of Demetrius and Lysander at the same time, causing them to fall in love with Hermia after waking up.

The plot took a dramatic turn. Both male protagonists fall in love with Hermia instead of falling in love with Helena. Helena could not accept this situation and quarreled with Hermia. Meanwhile, the Fairy Queen who just woke up fell in love with an actor who came to the forest to rehearse a play. The actor played the role of a donkey. In other words, the Fairy Queen fell in love with a donkey.

In this chaotic moment, the Fairy King stepped forward and removed everyone's magic, while retaining Demetrius' magic. Finally, everyone got to marry their lovers, and the Fairy King and Fairy Queen got back together again. The whole play ends with a happy ending.

Hermia is a representative of the new bourgeois women written by William Shakespeare. Her brave struggle against patriarchy expresses the emerging bourgeoisie's reconsideration of women's status and rights. The medieval church had a great influence on shaping the value orientation of society, and the issue of women's social status was no exception.

2. Feminism

2.1. Definition of feminism

Feminism can be traced back to the 18th century. Human productivity has increased significantly due to the two industrial revolutions, and the social form has also transformed from an agricultural society to an industrial society. The social structure and family formation of human beings are not the same as before. Women's dependence on men diminished, allowing them to contribute to social value in ways equal to men, thereby enhancing women's status. However, the mainstream social thinking did not change with this series of changes. Women remain under the influence of patriarchal thinking and are not allowed to stand up. Men were always superior whether in public or private spheres. Moreover, women were often deemed inferior to men right from birth, subjected to a life that denied them equal rights since childhood. This inequity extended to areas such as education, where women were often deprived of the same opportunities as men. Women were taught to obey their fathers and get married, which was a way that fathers could profit from their daughters. After getting married, they were required to obey their husbands in everything, do housework, and bear children. In this way, women were oppressed by patriarchal ideas from generation to generation and lived a life dependent on men. Women were not favored in social production and suffered severe gender discrimination and oppressive exclusion. This made it difficult for women to find a stable job or a stable income source. This situation made women more dependent on men. Men, in turn, held the belief that women should contribute to household chores to assist themselves. Consequently, women often found themselves confined to domestic responsibilities, including daily tasks such as laundry for their husbands, cooking, caring for the elderly, reproduction, and child-rearing. Therefore, patriarchal thinking has become a solidified thinking pattern, which deeply oppresses women. It not only affects women in every family, but also deeply affects social ideology, making it impossible for women to easily put aside their influence. This cloud of patriarchal ideological oppression ^[2].

Therefore, feminism came into being, and its purpose was to liberate women who had been oppressed by patriarchy for a long time so that women could obtain equal rights to education, work, and political participation as men, so as to build a more harmonious and equal society. At present, some of the values of feminism have been deeply integrated with the universal values of society.

2.2. The connection between feminism and humanism

2.2.1. The definition of humanism

Humanism originated in the 15th and 16th centuries, coinciding with the era of the author Shakespeare. Emerging as a response to the prolonged oppression and exploitation imposed by religion, humanism sought to break free from feudalism and religious dominance over human thought. It advocates putting people first, as opposed to divine authority, liberating individuals from medieval theology. At this time, British society was undergoing tremendous changes. Productivity increased significantly, the enclosure movement took place, and the rise of the bourgeoisie brought literature to an unprecedented level. Liberation of individuality and the pursuit of happiness were advocated, championing ideals of freedom and equality while opposing hierarchical concepts. Additionally, the movement advocated for rationality and opposed ignorance. In general, humanism is a human-centered ideological system that emphasizes human value, dignity, and freedom, advocates rational thinking and moral behavior, and advocates peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

2.2.2. The intrinsic connection between feminism and humanism

Although the subjects emphasized by humanism and feminism are different, they are still similar in many ways.

2.2.2.1. Equality and dignity

Humanism and feminism both emphasize individual rights. They believe that everyone is born equal and affirm the value of human beings or women. Moreover, they both believe that human dignity should be respected.

2.2.2.2. Opposing discrimination and violence

Humanism and feminism both oppose all forms of exploitation and oppression, whether based on gender, class, or wealth.

2.2.2.3. Social revolution

Both humanists and feminists were aware of the lag in social thought and social development, so they launched movements to promote the progress of human thought and social concepts, called for the elimination of inequality, and promoted social inclusion and justice.

3. Character analysis of Hermia, from a feminist perspective

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia demonstrates multiple feminist characteristics, showcasing exceptional autonomy, pursuit of power, a challenge to traditional concepts, solidarity among women, and self-realization and independence. Her portrayal in the play reflects a woman of tenacity, bravery, and determination to achieve personal freedom. Hermia becomes a symbol of women's resistance and pursuit in the face of societal restrictions and expectations.

3.1. The right to pursue personal freedom and happiness

Hermia displays her pursuit of autonomy and power in the play. The play starts with Hermia being dragged by the Grand Duke of Greece after she refuses to accept her father's arrangement for her marriage. Her father requests that she be executed because she did not want to marry Demetrius, saying that this is the traditional law of Greece. In fact, it is to maintain the social status of men by exploiting women's right to speak and freedom of marriage. Hermia's father obviously regards Hermia as his own property. He also knew the consequences of resisting the patriarchy, but he still insisted on his love for Lysander. This demonstrates her control over her own destiny and her pursuit of autonomous power. In a society full of patriarchy, she bravely pursued her own love and happiness, showing a strong self-awareness and unwillingness to be controlled by others.

3.2. Breaking social restrictions

As a noblewoman, Hermia faced the arrangements and expectations of her family and society for her marriage. However, she did not passively accept this arrangement but dared to challenge traditional marriage concepts and social expectations. Her behavior reflects women's resistance to society's positioning and restrictions on women's roles and also echoes feminism's call to get rid of traditional constraints.

3.3. Emotion and friendship of girls

The emotional bond and unity between women are shown between Hermia and Helena. They supported, understood, and encouraged each other, and faced difficulties and challenges together. Although there were conflicts between the two, Hermia dealt with Helena resolved them calmly, and did not break the alliance between women. This kind of emotional bond and unity is also what feminism emphasizes, that is, women should support each other and unite in the pursuit of common interests and goals. In addition, the complex emotional relationship between Helena and the heroine also demonstrates the emotional independence and self-

worth of individual women.

3.4. Self-actualization and independence

Hermia's desire for self-realization and independence is reflected in the fact that she does not just passively accept her fate. Instead, she chooses to pursue her own happiness and personal growth. There are a total of four couples in the script, she and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, the Grand Duke and the Grand Duchess, the Fairy King and the Fairy Queen. This play may appear as a comedy, but there were some tragic moments as well. For example, Helena put down her self-esteem too much in pursuit of Demetrius, and even said such words as "Treat me like your dog." She even mimicked Hermia to gain his favor. On the other hand, although the archduke and his wife are the only lovers with no conflicts in the plot, but the love between them is not pure, but a form of surrender. The archduke said to his wife: "I proposed to you with my sword, and won your heart with my mighty aggression." The conflict between the Fairy King and the Fairy Queen began with the little Indian prince. The Fairy King asked the Fairy Queen to hand over the child to him. The Fairy Queen refused, so the Fairy King became angry and punished her. This actually reflects the oppression of women in the patriarchal system. In addition, the book also describes the consequences of the conflict between the two:

"These are the forgeries of jealousy.
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,

By pavèd fountain, or by rushy brook,
Or in the beachèd margent of the sea,
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,

As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea
Contagious fogs, which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.
The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,

The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard.
The fold stands empty in the drownèd field,
And crows are fatted with the murrain flock.
The nine-men's-morris is filled up with mud,

And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.
The human mortals want their winter here.
No night is now with hymn or carol blessed.
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,

Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,

And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world,

By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension.
We are their parents and original”^[3].

Therefore, after the magic was finally broken, the Fairy Queen made a compromise with the Fairy King. She believed that as long as she compromised with Oberon and handed over the little Indian prince, Oberon would stop being jealous. She believed that as the reason for their conflict was eliminated, the suffering in the world would also disappear. For this beautiful vision, she was willing to endure the humiliation inflicted on her by the arrogant king, and she was willing to sacrifice her dignity for the glory of the king^[4]. The four relationships depicted in the play allow Hermia's character to shine as she is brave, self-respecting, self-loving, and independent. She overcame challenging situations with her own efforts and wisdom. She showed independence and wisdom by resolving the disputes with Lysander and Demetrius. This kind of self-realization and independence reflects her inner strength and value as a woman, which is what feminism advocates.

4. Conclusion

Shakespeare successfully created the character of Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She is a representative of the new bourgeois women. Her brave resistance to patriarchy expresses the emerging bourgeoisie's reconsideration of women's status and rights. She is brave, independent, not afraid of power, advocates freedom, and unites women. She is full of humanism and feminist tendencies Hermia's character prompts deep reflection on the status, power, and limitations imposed on women in a patriarchal society. Additionally, it underscores the significance of solidarity and mutual support among women. Hermia's character demonstrates the core concepts of feminism. She pursues independent choice and true love and forms strong friendships and emotional bonds with other women. Her image triggers profound reflections on women's autonomous power, solidarity, and independence. However, different from Hermia, the other women in this work are still traditionally dependent on and subservient to men.

Through the reversal of the plot and the tension of drama, this work calls for the equality of all living beings and emphasizes that everyone has the right to pursue freedom and happiness. It also expresses the author's deep understanding of love. He believed that love is fleeting and elusive, which also planted the seeds for the vigorous development of feminism.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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