Hermia: Unconventional Woman of the Renaissance

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During the time of William Shakespeare, women were expected to follow conventions and traditional expectations. Women were expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient. Their personalities were to be to include characteristics that presented them as respectful and polite. They were to always respect the wishes of their father and male figures. If a woman was to disobey these conventions, she would be deemed disobedient, insubordinate, and argumentative (Dunn 15-16). These were women who attempted to be active in the choices made for them and were vocal towards males. In a time where women were obligated to abide by set conventions, Shakespeare frequently created female characters who defied conventions (Dash 1). In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hermia is a good representative of an unconventional woman. She disobeys traditional requirements. Hermia accepts gifts or tokens from men, meets alone with a man without a family member present, disobeys her father's commands, and leaves the family home without a chaperon. All of these behaviors were considered unacceptable for women in Shakespeare's time. But, instead of punishing the character for her defiance, Shakespeare rewards and praises Hermia. He validates this character by showing her as a positive figure and providing her with a happy ending, married to the man she loves.

One of the first indications of Hermia's unconventional behavior occurs in the first scene of the play, where Hermia disregards the requirement of obedience to her father and other male figures of authority. Instead of agreeing to her father's wishes that she marry a young man, Demetrius, who is her father's choice of husband, Hermia is having a secret relationship with another young man, Lysander. Her father, Egeus, therefore brings Hermia before the Duke to

complain about her disobedience. Egeus explains to the Duke that his daughter has met secretly with Lysander, and has also broken an enforced rule according to which women were not to receive gifts or tokens from men without their father's approval. Egeus states accusingly: "This man hath bewitched the bosom of my child. Thou, thou Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes, and interchanged love-tokens with my child." (1.1.29-31). Egeus then continues to give a detailed description of the gifts exchanged between the two: "With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits, knacks, trifles nosegays, sweetmeats, messengers of strong prevailment in unhardened youth" (1.1.35-37). By adding a lengthy description of the gifts given to Hermia, Egeus shows that Hermia's behavior has been persistent and has continued over a period of time suggesting that she has repeatedly and knowingly broken this rule. Furious with the loss of control over his daughter, Egeus attacks Lysander with the words, "With cunning bast thou filched my daughter's heart, turned her obedience, which is due to me, to stubborn harshness" (1.1.35-40).

Hermia is also openly argumentative towards several male figures in the play, including - Egeus, and Duke Theseus. Regardless of the convention which kept women compliant to orders given, she continually retorts to statements made by the Duke Theseus and her father commanding her to marry Demetrius, a man she does not love. Attempting to reinforce the gravity of such rebellious behavior towards her father, Theseus turns to Hermia with the words, "What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid. To you your father should be as a god." (1.1.48-49). He emphasizes the importance of respecting her father to the point that he is almost like a divine power that she cannot disobey. He explains that Egeus created her and made her all that

she is. According to Theseus, Egeus is "[o]ne that composed your beauties; yea, and one to whom you are but as a form in wax by him imprinted" (1.1.51-52). Furthermore, her father has "power to leave the figure, or disfigure it" (1.1.52). Theseus is restating the expected conventions of the time according to which Hermia owes her father total obedience, without question and without argument. Theseus then adds, "Demetrius is a worthy gentleman" (1.1.53) in an attempt to convince her of the suitability of the match her father has proposed. Instead of being cowed, Hermia defends her opinions when she wittily replies to the Duke: "So is Lysander." (1.1.54). With this beginning statement in opposition to the Duke, Hermia quickly evolves into an argumentative and noncompliant participant in the conversation. This attitude contradicts the behavioral requirements of women at the time to be guided entirely by male figures in all decisions. She not only speaks out against her father's wishes, but speaks back to the Duke. The Duke then replies, "In himself he is {worthy]; but in this kind, wanting your father's voice, the other must be held the worthier." (1.1.55-57). In other words, while Lysander is worthy, Hermia has no choice but to obey her father. Despite this second reminder of the traditional expectations, Hernia replies to the Duke, "I would my father looked but with my eyes" (1.1.58). Hermia wishes that her father would reconsider and simply try to understand that she does not wish to marry Demetrius because of her love for Lysander. The Duke, noticing Hermia's continuing opposition, threatens her by explaining the possible consequences of her actions. He states that she has two choices: "to die the death, or to abjure for ever the society of men" (1.1.67-69). He then strongly advises her to reconsider what she wants. After being warned of the cost of such defiant behavior, Hermia makes her final statement regarding her refusal to marry Demetrius;

"So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, ere I will yield my virgin patent up unto his lordship whose unwished yoke my soul consents not to give sovereignty" (1.1.81-84). Hermia has repeated her refusal to marry Demetrius and would rather accept her fate and die than to do so.

Hermia not only verbally defines herself as an insubordinate character, but also displays her defiance of convention through her actions by seeing Lysander alone without a family member present and by leaving her father's home without a chaperon. In the first scene, Egeus, reveals that he is aware that Lysander and Hermia have been meeting secretly at night. He states to Lysander, "Thou bast by moonlight at her window sung, with feigning voice verses of feigning love and stolen the impression of her fantasy" (1.1.30-34). These meetings have angered Egeus. Threats from both her father and the Duke do not discourage Hermia's determination to meet with Lysander yet again. During this meeting, Hermia agrees to run away with Lysander. Lysander directs her to meet him outside her home the following night and together they will escape. Hermia excitedly replies, "By all the vows that ever men have broke, in number more than ever women spoke. In the same place thou hast appointed me, tomorrow truly will I meet with thee." (1.1.177-180). With these words, Hermia expresses her eagerness to defy the rule never to leave her father's home without a chaperon. Despite being warned on several occasions that her actions are not deemed suitable for a woman or daughter, Hermia continues to engage in private meetings with Lysander, right after meeting with the Duke.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia steps across boundaries that limited the lives of women during Shakespeare's time. Instead of accepting her father's choice of marriage partner, Hermia ventures off into the forest with Lysander. She knowingly ignores the rules and refuses

to hide her thoughts and emotions behind the curtains of courtesy drawn by society. She embraces her ability to make her opinions heard through words and by actions. In a time when women were restricted to silence and obedience, Hermia embodies the free soul and spirit of a woman whose personality cannot be held down by society's restraints. Instead of punishing her, Shakespeare rewards her. At the magical conclusion of the play, as if they have been transformed by the night in the forest, Theseus disregards Egeus' protests and allows Hermia to marry Lysander, the man of her choice. Thus, he validates her unconventional behavior and demonstrates his own unconventional view of women of his time.

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