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## UNIT 3 *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* : I

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### Structure

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we will concentrate on three readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:  
How stage representations of the opening scene can influence our reading of the rest of the play

The criticism of power and authority in the play

Patterns of contrast and repetition

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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The division headings of this unit are misleading. No sensible person today reads drama by breaking it up in to "plot," "theme," or "character." On the other hand, effective learning travels from the known to the unknown, and since many of you have probably been taught to divide characters up for study, we thought we would start with that. Our intention, however, is to see the place of characters in the whole drama.

Any reading of a literary text simply interprets it in a particular way. In other units you have seen historical, linguistic, and generic interpretations, and one introducing you to the festive or celebratory nature of this comedy.

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### 3.2 THE ATHENIAN ARISTOCRATS

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We concentrate here on stage representations of the opening scene and their influence on our attitude to the rest of the play.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* starts and virtually ends with the aristocrats. To be exact, it starts with Theseus. How we interpret his relationship with Hippolyta in this scene decides how we will view the relationships of the other lovers. For example, most readers feel that Theseus represents authority, especially patriarchal authority.

We come to this conclusion largely because of what happens in the opening scene which has two episodes: Theseus' announcement of his coming marriage to Hippolyta, and Egeus' demand that his daughter marry Demetrius.

Theseus' announcement of his marriage:

Theseus has just defeated Hippolyta in battle. She was queen of the Amazons, an all-female community. Theseus' conquest of the Amazon queen has been seen by many as an assertion of male authority. He is now to marry her "with pomp, with triumph" (I i 19). He is cheerfully excited, she remains silent. He calls her "my Hippolyta." She does not call him "my Theseus" until Act V when the play is nearly over and harmony has been firmly established.

From Philip C. McGuire's account of five different stage versions of this episode, we summarise two opposing stage versions of the opening scene ("Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen" in *New Casebooks* 139-160).

If Hippolyta remains next to Theseus and smiles through his speeches, then she appears to share his enthusiasm for their impending marriage. Since the play is about love ending in harmonious marriage, the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta in the opening episode becomes the ideal to be learned by the other couples. The audience would have appreciated this. The strongest message in Elizabethan Romantic Comedy was that social hierarchies should be maintained. It was considered natural and proper that a woman should be subordinate to her husband, just as it was natural and proper for a state to be ruled by a male. So, Theseus' subduing Hippolyta first in battle and then in marriage would have seemed proper to Shakespeare's audience.

The opposite interpretation depends on Hippolyta staying grimly apart from Theseus on the stage. If she does, then she obviously does not share his enthusiasm for their marriage. Her lack of enthusiasm is reinforced in III i 102 ff., when they are on a hunt. Theseus wants to show off his hounds. Hippolyta says that she has seen Hercules' hounds, implying that Theseus' hunt cannot match Hercules'. Since the ruler and his bride-to-be have a disharmonious relationship, it follows that their subjects, the young lovers, will imitate them. Only supernatural power like the magic of Oberon is able to bring harmony to Athens, as it does to his own marriage.

In the second interpretation, Oberon is the arbiter of marital happiness. This has exasperated feminists who say that it is unimportant whether Theseus or Oberon is ultimately in charge because both enforce patriarchal order. After all, even though Oberon is not mortal, he is a male and an aristocrat.

The more relevant point is that Oberon wants the Athenian couples to be happy and instructs Puck to ensure this by pouring magic juice into Demetrius' eyes. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, pours the juice into his eyes, and he, seeing Helena instead of Hermia when he awakens, falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Puck has also poured the juice into Demetrius' eyes who also sees Helena when he awakens, and, if we may use the expression, all hell breaks loose. Eventually the magic is reversed in all but Demetrius who remains in love with Helena which was Oberon's intention all along.

In short, disharmony stems from Theseus, spills over into the forest and, in spite of Oberon's excellent intentions, continues for quite some time.

Let us now turn to the second episode of the opening scene. Immediately after Theseus announces his marriage, Egeus bursts in demanding that Theseus enforce Athenian law according to which a daughter is her father's property and she must

obey him. Hermia must marry Demetrius, failing which Theseus must ensure that she dies. Theseus says he cannot change the law, so Hermia must school herself to obey her father. (In the second stage version, Hippolyta has been reading the law book that Egeus brings with him and when Theseus says that he cannot change the law she snaps it shut in anger, making it clear that she respects neither Theseus nor the law of his land.)

Theseus' response is curious on two counts.

First, he offers Hermia two alternatives and not just one as Egeus does. If she disobeys her father, he says, she must *either die or* join a nunnery. Why does he suggest a nunnery? It may be that Egeus has not revealed the whole law because after his demand that Hermia must obey him or die as per Athenian law, she asks Theseus what is "The worst that may befall me in this case, / If I refuse to wed Demetrius" (I i 63-64). Theseus replies that it is death or a nunnery for her. But there is a strong suggestion that Theseus has invented the nunnery option on the spot, and that the repeated rebellion against the harshest aspects of the law in this play starts with Theseus. Of course, some may say that being in a nunnery would be a living death, but Hermia herself says that if she cannot marry Lysander, she will not marry anyone. So Theseus' ruling fits in with part of her wishes. Egeus and the law demand death, Theseus encourages life.

After this, Theseus walks out of the room accompanied by everyone except Lysander and Hermia who are free to plan their elopement to a place where Athenian law does not operate. Theseus is either a very absent minded ruler or he is more on the lovers' side than Egeus'. Had he sided with Egeus, he would have seen to it that these two lovers are not left alone. Once more, we get the feeling that the Duke himself has rebelled against the law, this time to allow love to flourish.

Remember, Romantic Comedy celebrates life, love, and fruitfulness. Theseus' response to Egeus foreshadows the end of the play when the lovers will return to weddings and laughter in a rejuvenated Athens which blesses their love.

Having shown us the law as well Athens' potential for rejuvenation, Shakespeare shifts the action to the forest outside the city where Athenian law does not apply. The focus is now on the lovers rather than on Theseus.

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### 3.3 THE LOVERS, OR TOWN AND COUNTRY

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Later editors of Shakespeare's drama made the five Act division in modern editions of the play. Shakespeare did not divide his play into Acts, nor did he mark the beginning and end of a scene. A scene ended when there were no more actors on the stage, then a new set of players entered and the next scene began.

We can analyse *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sequentially, that is, as one scene follows another. The sequence of action in Romantic Comedy is from the court or city to a pastoral setting (forest, country) and back to the court or city. The court obstructs true love which flowers in a pastoral ambience. The impediments to love are meanwhile removed and the lovers return to a kinder, more humane court where weddings, feasts, and dances, symbolising harmony, conclude the action. You have learnt about this in Unit 2.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows this sequence but in the next part of this unit we will analyse a pattern of the play, not its sequential action. Unlike a sequence, a pattern is static; it extends over the entire play. For instance, in this play, dramatic

elements seem to come in sets of two. There are two sets of lovers, two rulers, and two men who fall in love with the wrong woman. Patterns impose order on chaos, they order disorder. The rigid patterns of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* control the wildly changing relationships between the characters. The result is like a dance. In a dance, too, the movements are energetic and constant but they are controlled by the discipline of the dance.

We have to decide which pattern we wish to analyse. For this, we will follow the method of structuralism. Structural critics emphasise the binaries in a text. For a structural analysis, we must isolate two opposite ideas or images and group dramatic elements under these. Among the many noticeable binaries in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are light and dark, daylight and moonlight, humans and fairies, aristocrats and artisans.

In order to link together the different kinds of critical readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we have shown you, we have selected the binary of Athens and the forest which is so strong a pattern that it can be represented in two columns, as we have shown. This binary fits in with generic criticism: some characters appear in the court but not in the forest (pastoral area), others in the forest and not in the court, while some bridge the court and pasture. You will see how details of gender and power relations also emerge, and you can imagine that any stage production could use a structural analysis to emphasise relationships between settings and characters.

After reading this section, you should be able to list dramatic elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* according to some other binary classification. For example, you could divide the play according to poetry and prose, or quarrels and dances. Each such exercise will tell you more about the play as well as about Shakespeare's skill in organising his dramatic material.

### Athens

1. Dramatic action in Athens takes place in the Court.
2. Theseus, a mortal, rules.
3. Athenian law is harsh and used to maintain order in society.
4. Lovers are unhappy here. Lysander and Hermia are separated because of a law that Theseus says he cannot alter; Helena is rejected by Demetrius who once made love to her as Lysander reports and Theseus endorses. Theseus says he has wanted to speak to Demetrius about this but it slipped his mind.
5. Athens has a hierarchical, patriarchal social order. The Duke is head of the state, the father of the family, and women are expected to obey them.
6. In Athens, women are not allowed to choose their husbands and they must submit to the men.
7. The Duke endorses couplings at the end of the play. Earlier, though he seems to encourage the Hermia-Lysander relationship, he is not very open about his support, if it is indeed support. Helena's unhappiness is completely ignored by the Athenian court.
8. When Theseus is appealed to as ruler of Athens, he responds as a dignified if slightly absent-minded ruler should. His ducal activities are conducted in public and except for the vagueness of his support for Hermia, nothing is hidden or secret.
9. There seem to be no "natural" families. There are no mothers. The practical reason for this may have been that with only male players, it was easier to have men in the cast. But in the play,

according to Athenian law, fathers are more important than mothers. Hermia has a father and no mother; Helena has a parent but we do not know whether this is her mother or father; the men have no parents apparently.

10. Friendships are important and remembered in a crisis. Hermia and Helena are childhood friends, Lysander and Demetrius are friends.
11. The action takes place in the day.

### The Forest

1. The forest represents the pastoral or natural world.
2. Oberon, the fairy king rules.
3. Practical jokes, songs, and quarrels occur but there is no evident law.
4. Oberon wants the human lovers to be happy.
5. The forest seems to be a place of disorder. The king and queen of fairies are married but have quarrelled; while Athenian women must obey their men, queen Titania defies her husband and asserts her right to keep the

The bridges between Athens and the forest are

- The Mechanicals who go from Athens to the forest to rehearse their play; lose Bottom who has a dalliance with a queen, thus bridging a vast social gap; and then return to perform their play in Athens
- Lysander and Hermia who escape from Athens where they are deeply unhappy but the forest makes them unhappy as well. As the horrible night proceeds, they long for daylight and Athens to which they return with relief.
- Theseus and Oberon both eventually control their consorts and events in general.

You will notice, however, that the difference between the binaries is not as absolute as it seems at first glance but that there are more common points than the ones we have listed. For example, the unhappiness of the lovers increases in the forest where Lysander falls out of love with Hermia and although Demetrius falls in love with Helena, she suspects that he is insincere and out to hurt her by declaring he loves her.

Indian boy; lovers literally lose each other in the forest; lovers fall out of love; the Athenian men fall in love with the same woman; the Mechanicals lose their star actor.

6. In the forest, Helena and Hermia fight to keep the men they have chosen to love even when these men do not reciprocate their love.
7. Unhappy lovers do not appeal to King Oberon but he notices Helena's unhappiness straight away and sets about arranging the right pairings.
8. Oberon does not even make a pretence of asserting his authority. He achieves his desire – especially of getting the Indian boy from Titania – by deceit and magic. i.e., in both Athens and the forest, the ruler eventually controls his consort
9. There are no families at all but Titania is foster mother to the Indian boy. Athens has no mothers.
10. There are no friendships between the forest dwellers.
11. The action takes place in the moonlight or in darkness.

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### 3.4 LET US SUM UP

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If you know the play as well as you should, these analyses of the play will have been fun to read.

You should now be familiar with some important contemporary ways of reading literature. We have discussed the power structures, gender relations, two stage interpretations, and a binary structure of the play. We hope we have convinced you that no analysis of the play will make much sense if you separate a character or group of characters from the rest of the play.

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### 3.5 QUESTIONS

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1. What two interpretations are possible of the opening episode in Act I, sc.i?
2. What is a structural reading of a play?
3. What is the relationship of a father and daughter under Athenian law? Do you think Egeus gives us all the legal information in this matter? What are the two pieces of evidence we have that there may be more to the law?
4. Think about the gender issues in the play. List the many instances of Shakespeare's sympathy for women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
5. Look up the passages that describe the forest. Is there anything in them to suggest that the forest is not entirely beautiful?
6. What, according to Hermia, is the insult Helena repeats again and again during the grand quarrel scene?
7. What is generic criticism?