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Love and Marriage in Shakespeare

Throughout the ages, the idea of love and the proposal of marriage has changed profoundly. Today we know love as a hard feeling to describe, let alone to express and to feel. It is the butterflies in one’s stomach, the sudden onset of a rapid heartbeat, and the loss of strength in the knees. Marriage today is considered a way of ensuring these feelings for life, for the one you love to be yours until death, or until broken vow in some cases. However, was this always the purpose of marriage? Better yet, was love even a factor of this involvement? In the 16th century, the time of Shakespeare and often the setting of his plays, the idea of love was but a wisp in the wind. It could be put into only so many words, and so many situations, but it was rarely pursued, and rarely a suitable reason for marriage.

However, the idea of love and marriage in Shakespeare cannot possibly be limited to only one view. There are different types of love and different reasons to marry that are present in each of Shakespeare’s works. Luckily, these relationships between men and women can be seen most clear in his comedies. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, are but only three spectacular examples of Shakespeare’s wide array of comedies that describe both penchant and the contempt views Shakespeare portrays of love and marriage.

Now the concepts of love and marriage should not just be understood from the works to be analyzed by Shakespeare, but first by what can be reflected in them from that of his own time and existence. Looking into the background of Shakespeare’s own period of living and what he may have been taught as a citizen of England are key components to what the characters in his play experience.

Shakespeare lived during an exceptional period of English history. His supposed birth date is best indicated as April 23, 1564, 6 years after Queen Elizabeth took the throne. Therefore, the majority of years in his life being set in the time of Elizabeth England, a time in which London became a cultural and commercial center where learning and literature thrived (National Endowment for the Arts). On that notion alone, a lot can be drawn on the ideas of love and marriage from this period.

During the Elizabethan period, it was considered common knowledge that to marry for love was incredibly foolish. Although that’s not to say that love could not occur in marriage or that it did not exist at all, but that the inclination to wed was much more like a business agreement or a contract than anything else. Marriage was often arranged by the parents and the future assurance of financial stability was a large aspect to be considered.

This kind of proposal of marriage, one absent of love and in need of compensation, is what should be closely observed when reading the works of Shakespeare. So that one can draw, for themselves, from each of the characters present in the plays, their feelings, thoughts, and personal goals, and what is really in their hearts. As to whether it is the fondness and affection they possess for another that drives their desires, as it does more often today, or if it is only what that other person can grant them by the joining of hands, as it was often seen in Shakespeare’s time.

If one were to search the world for the perfect display of marital relationships, be it in the Elizabethan period or that in the modern day, it would not be found on the streets or in the happy suburban household, but rather between the pages and the lines in *The Taming of the Shrew*. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a play within a play, and it takes an in-depth look at marriage, love, and the power struggles that occur in both.

The play-within-the-play begins with the character Lucentio, a young man traveling to Padua to study. However, upon arriving in Padua, instead of Lucentio diving straight into his books, he dives headfirst into his pursuits for Bianca, the younger and prettier of the two daughters of Baptista Minola. This first emergence of characters introduces the first relationship to emerge in the play, and already it reflects an idealistic love, but an unrealistic approach to marriage.

Lucentio reflects the picturesque, romantic view of love, head-over-heels for Bianca at first glance. However, Bianca, seemingly obedient and innocent, is pursued by two other suitors, Horcentio and Gremio, and by her father’s insistence will not be allowed to wed to the highest bidder until her older sister, Katharine, is wed. While Lucentio and Bianca face this struggle, and he courts her by pretending to be a tutor, the next characters emerge as a way of solving this issue. The second couple comes into the story by this, and it is a complete reversal of the romantic and courtly love felt by Lucentio. Petrucio, a garish and exuberant gentleman traveling from Verona, comes to Padua “to wive and thrive” (Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew). Seeking no other quality than that of a large dowry, Petrucio hears of Katherine and pursues her.

Katherine, although very quick-tempered and prone to cruelty, soon subdues herself to Petrucio. This couple brings about the second relationship we encounter between the two and it can best be described as the more practical marriage, absent of love. Very similar to that of other marriages during the Elizabethan reign, in which there was no prior relationship or love and affection due to the primary need of assets. Petrucio obtaining Katherine’s dowry, and Katherine having a husband to subjugate herself to and abide by. The woman in the marriage was often only considered as property, but as we see in *The Taming of the Shrew*, even though Katherine does not appear to be in love with Petrucio, she grows respect for him and in turn earns it. In The Taming of the Shrew, Katharine makes a lengthy speech at the end of the play indicating her new and devout opinion of marriage and men in general, “Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee and for thy maintenance commits his body to painful labor both by sea and land…” (V.ii.146-179). For Katherine, whom once scorned the very idea of marriage and men in general, by the end of the play, unlike her sister, Bianca, which wed for love, respects the institution of marriage and see’s the husband as a figure of support and protection that only asks for the wife’s kindness and obedience in return.

As mentioned, Bianca does eventually marry Lucentio for love once her sister Katherine is wed. However, as one of the many depictions of women and men living together, their joining for love could now be heading for a rocky course due to the lack of respect and obedience present in the marriage seen at the end of the play.

So what does this have to say about Shakespeare’s view of love and marriage in this play alone? Drawing from the inferences made, while you can marry for love and it is a beautiful thing, it was not rational for this era. In both instances the characters treat marriage as a financial or business transaction, where the women are “horse flesh” to be sought after and secured. However, it is the institution of marriage and the role as a wife that allows Katharine to grow, while her sister Bianca does not. Through this, it can be said that the idea of marriage in 16th century society is a necessity, while love is not. The instant feelings of love Bianca and Lucentio felt, does not necessarily requite, by the suggestion of the play, that their marriage will be happy and long-lived. The sides of respect are unequal, and perhaps it is because of the blindness of love that the two characters do not notice what is really needed for them. Marriage itself is a taming school, where two individuals must learn to live and respect each other in order to provide for one another. When the idea of love is put into place as a reason for marriage, as depicted in the play, the respect is absent and the marriage becomes impractical because it was not a marriage chosen primarily for the needs of both parties. Instead, love is the only thing that bonds the two, and it is led to believe that it will falter. Luckily, this is not the only idea of love and marriage that is portrayed in the works of Shakespeare.

While *The Taming of the Shrew* revels in the downsides of love, *As You Like It* takes pleasure in the delights of love. In *As You Like It*, all precedent notions of love being suppressing or tormenting are cast aside, as well as the idea of marrying for assets. Not only this, but several different types of love are introduced between characters in the play, anything ranging from the ideal romantic and courtly love to the necessary family love and to the hopeless and unrequited love.

*As You Like It* begins with the father figure of Sir Rowland de Boys dying, leaving behind his sons Oliver and Orlando. Also, the Duke Senior that once ruled over the French court, has just been overthrown by his own brother, the Duke Frederick. Here lies the first conflicts to arise, as well as the first type of potential relationship. Oliver treats his younger brother Orlando altogether horrible. Orlando has basically been reduced to that of a slave in his brother’s eyes. Being forced to work and live in the garden, unable to receive his education or any nobleman like expenses. The same miserable relationship can be seen for the Duke Senior and the Duke Frederick, after Duke Frederick betrays his older brother and castes him off the thrown and into exile in the Forest of Ardenne.

Nearing the conclusion of the play, when all characters have entered into the Forest of Ardenne, where later we learn that Orlando has saved Oliver from a fierce lioness and Duke Frederick has a change of heart after speaking to a holy man, this first potential relationship turns into the first type of love present in the play. The once feeling of hatred between the two pairs of brothers has now become a feeling of brotherly love. The feelings that were once neglected between the family members are now full of compassion and new-found understanding for each other.

Similar to this type of love, there is also a sisterly love presented in the play between two characters. The characters of Rosalind, the daughter of Duke Senior, and Celia, the daughter of Duke Frederick. Introduced at the beginning of the play as well, these two characters are together against all odds. When Rosalind’s father is cast out of the French court at the very beginning, it is upon Celia’s insistence and fondness for Rosalind that allows her to stay at court for some time. Even though Duke Frederick soon casts out Rosalind as well, this does not sway his own daughter’s affections and sisterly love that she has for Rosalind. Celia goes as far too even abandon her own father and her own home to join Rosalind as she ventures into the forest. The pair are not actually sisters, they are cousins, but it is clearly evident between the two of them that they would support each other unconditionally.

The third potential relationship begins with the day Orlando sets out to wrestle Charles, the Duke’s wrestler, in order to obtain some money before retreating into the forest and away from his brother. Upon defeating Charles, Orlando is congratulated by Celia and Rosalind, where Rosalind and he instantly fall in love (Shakespeare, As You Like It). This relationship leads to the second type of love found in this play, the common romantic and courtly love. This love can be described as an instant connection and feeling, and eventually requires a need of overcoming boundaries to obtain. Similar to the love present in the previous play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, between Lucentio and Bianca, both couples are faced with obstacles, whether it be dispelling other suitors, marrying off a sister, or proving genuine love. Also, romantic love is noticeably expressed in any situation, just as Orlando comes to express his by placing poetry and carvings upon any and all trees in the forest.

To lay contrast to the ideal romantic and courtly love, another type of love appears in this play. Through the emergence of the characters Touchstone, the court jester of Duke Frederick and friend to Rosalind and Celia, and Audrey, a goat herder. Similar to that of every other couple in the play, they are joined in the Forest of Ardenne. However, the view they regard love with is very different compared to the typical. The two are very cynical about love, and they relish more in the physical aspects of it. “Well, praised be the gods for thy foulness; sluttishness may come hereafter” is remarked by Touchstone as him and Audrey wed, clearly identifying the lack of love that characterizes the relationship. This new type of relationship is best seen as the bawdy and simply sexual type of love. This type of love is seen as less superficial compared to that of the romantic love, and perhaps more truthful, but it also gives the indication that it is not intended to last.

Another type of love is introduced through the pairing of the next individuals, Silvius and Phebe, a shepherd and shepherdess encountered in the forest. Silvius is often seen to be following Phebe around like a love-sick puppy, while she continuously snubs his romantic advances. However, once Rosalind disguised as Ganymede encounters this she quickly intervenes and openly berates Phebe for not considering herself lucky to receive Silvius’ advances, “And why, I pray you? Who might be your mother, that you insult, exult, and all at once, over the wretched? What though you have no beauty,--“(III.V.135). Despite this scolding by Rosalind disguised as Ganymede, soon the same spurned affections are experienced by Phebe in regards to Rosalind herself. Both of these relationships make up the type of unrequited love to be introduced. Ganymede does not love Phebe because she is a woman, and once Ganymede is discovered as Rosalind, Phebe is forced to lamentably marry Silvius.

This play as well has a lot to remark about Shakespeare’s views on love and marriage. While marriage does take place in this play, it is not as relevant a subject as love is in regards to this play. Each differing type of love, whether it be a family bond, a romantic pursuit, or an unmet one, all result in the union or reunion of a pair. Compared to that of the previous play’s message as seeming to dispel the thought of marrying for love, because it can leave the couple more unhappy than happy, there is nothing but those thoughts of marrying for love and ending up joyful to occur in this play. Shakespeare portrays over and over again what risky and foolish things can occur due to the nature of love and lust, but even with indications of the silliness of these actions and these thoughts, the necessity of love is seen to drive his characters to their overall conclusions and happiness.

In the next play, *The Merchant of Venice*, both the realistic ideals to marry and the unrealistic pursuits of love, which were drawn from in the previous plays, can be alluded to. The portrayal of love in the *Merchant of Venice*, again comes in a variety of forms. However, the indication of the absence of love is what hints at the practical, passionless reasons for the common marriage in this play that were common of the time.

*The Merchant of Venice* begins with the introduction of Antonio, and instantly the conflict of his dear friend, Bassanio, in need of money arises. These are the first two individuals that present the possibility of a relationship, and not just a friendly love, but subtle hints to suggesting that the connection is deeper. “I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it; And if it stand, as you yourself still do, Within the eye of honor, be assured my purse, my person, my extremist means lie all unlocked to your occasions,” (I.i.142-146) this quote is spoken by Antonio at the very beginning of *The Merchant of Venice* and it indicates what a strong love he holds for Bassanio. So much that Antonio would not only drive himself into debt for Bassanio with one word from him, but he implies his “entire” person – his life – he would give at Bassanio’s need.

The next couple is introduced in the same situation of Bassanio asking for money, but it is not feelings towards Antonio that are spoken of. Rather, the need Bassanio has for money from Antonio is so he is able to travel to Belmont and woo and wed Portia, a wealthy young heiress. While the type of love indicated by Portia and Bassanio is portrayed to be romantic love that is not the only drive resulting in their marriage. Bassanio says he “loves” Portia, but pursues her for her money. The same relationship, said to be for love, but more likely for the possession of riches, can be noted for the pairing of Lorenzo, a Christian gentleman, and Jessica, the daughter of the Jewish moneylender, Shylock. While both couples suggest true love as the reason for marriage, Lorenzo would not have run off with Jessica had she not stole from her father and neglected her family’s beliefs, and who is to say Bassanio would have courted Portia had it not been for her incredible wealth too.

The only true type of love that can actually be drawn from this play is that of the love for money. The love that claims to be real, such as that between Lorenzo and Jessica and that between Bassanio and Portia, is built on a rocky foundation. As the base noted in both pairings is not for true feelings, but rather for the need of capital. While the only other love that seems to be actually genuine is, Antonio and Bassanio, as a friendly love but is not requited in what the play suggests as more than a friendship. There is also the love Shylock has for his daughter Jessica, but that love is destroyed and abandoned when she betrays him and runs off with his funds and prized possessions to marry a Christian.

The view of love in *The Merchant of Venice*, is most similar to the view Shakespeare identifies in that of *The Taming of the Shrew*, unrealistic. Had it been devoted love, as was seen is *As You Like It*, the means of marriage and the feelings of love in the play would be authentic, but that is not the case. Instead, the idea of love arises from more practical necessities of each individual, which can most clearly seen to be based on logic and not emotion.

Between the 16th century and the modern, there are plenty of astounding differences. A King or Queen is not reigning over the land, women are not as subjected to a gender role, and fathers most certainly do not give their daughters to the highest bidder, at least in the sense that it is noticeably arranged. However, the portrayal of love has remained eternal. Through the extended view of love and marriage in Shakespeare, it is seen that love can be a burden, love can be an irrelevant thought in the means of marriage. But there is still love. Throughout any work of Shakespeare there is the suggestion of love, the overwhelming warmth that sends characters to do thoughtless things and drives them into madness. Not only does the pursuit of love and its idea exist in the comedies, but it can be found even in *Hamlet*. “Doubt thou stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never bout I love” (II, ii, 116-119) a play defined as a tragedy, completely different from the makings of the comedies described previously, is still seen to possess such strong desires and feelings of love that are said to be absent and irrelevant in Shakespeare’s century.

The only conclusion is that love is boundless in Shakespeare’s works. Whether absent in the marriages of his time, and even in most marriages in his plays, the feelings and the thoughts of love must have consumed Shakespeare’s heart and mind. Love is a necessity, a primary component, and in one way or another brings Shakespeare’s readers and viewers to the idea that was not so expressed at the time. While the views of love are unlimited to the situation, to the pleasure, and to the story, and the view of marriage is limited to that of either conformed need or timely demise, they go hand-in-hand. And hand-in-hand is the connection of Shakespeare, his time, his writing, and himself, to that of centuries far beyond him.