

Comparison between the plays *Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare by means of the
topic
„love at first sight“

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1. Introduction

„Love at first sight is an emotional condition whereby a person feels romantic attraction for a stranger on the first encounter with the stranger.“ (www.wikipedia.org).

The theme of love at first sight is a popular topic and it occurs in many of his plays, regardless if it is a comedy or a tragedy. The difference that exist between those two genres is the way they deal with it. The focus in the comedies lays in the development of love and not, as it is the case in the tragedies, in the outgoing.

In the two plays *Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the topic of love at first sight has an important role. The way it is presented is different from other, maybe more typical comedies, where love at first sight can be observed more clearly than in the ones mentioned above. Nevertheless it will be interesting to see how this topic is dealt with in these comedies and why there is a difference to the „love at first sight“-scheme we know from bestselling books or famous Hollywood movies.

2. Love at first sight in *Taming of the Shrew*

In *Taming of the Shrew* the aspect of love at first sight will be analyzed through the characters of Katharina and her sister Bianca. The way the two sister experience love is completely different which makes it interesting to compare. The one of Bianca is the more classical way: she sees Lucentio and falls in love with him immediately. Katharina who is called a shrew in Padua, is forced to marry

against her will and has to suffer much pain at the beginning of her marriage.

a) Katharina

Katharina is known throughout Padua as the daughter of Baptista Minola but also as a shrew. She is beautiful and rich and brings every quality with her, that would allow her also to experience love at first sight, if there were not her bad temper and her stubborn will.

She is filled with bitterness because she feels not treated properly and also misunderstood and she is afraid that she has to die as an old maid (*Taming of the Shrew*, Act II, Sc I, verse 31-36). She puts on a defensive attitude so that nothing can reach and hurt her anymore. She closes herself from love at first sight, because she always expects the worst of people and she does not want to be surprised or proven wrong.

Katharina is the most modern person in the play because she does not obey her father like good daughters should and she does not want to be sold to any man like cattle on the market (*Taming of the Shrew*, Act I, Sc I, verse 57-58).

The wedding scene gives a few information about how Katharina stands by the topic of love. It becomes clear that her shrewish behavior is based and caused by the pain she feels and had to bear in her life. She blames her father for not being allowed to marry out of love but against her will. She told him before that she does not want to be sold like a cattle but he does not listen to her wishes. If she had had a choice, she would have married out of love.

„KATHARINA: No shame but mine: I must, forsooth,
be forced to give my hand opposed against my
heart unto a mad-brain rudesby full of spleen;
who woo'd in haste and means to wed at leisure.
I told you, I, he was a frantic fool [...] Now
must the world point at poor Katharina, and say,

'Lo there is mad Petruchio's wife, if it would please him come and marry her!'" (Act III, Scene II, verse 9-21).

Her attitude towards love and her marriage changes through Petruchio who tries to tame her. She seems to know that he does all the cruelties to her because he loves her so much and because of his efforts she has to answer with love towards him. She is blinded and becomes a totally different person. When he has finished his taming, she is the good wife that everyone wanted her to be.

„KATHARINA: [...] 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, to watch the nights in storms, the day in cold, whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe; and craves no other tribute at thy hands but love, fair looks and true obedience; too little payment for such a great debt.“ (Act V, Scene II, verse 159-167).

Her way of seeing love is influenced by the love that Petruchio makes her see. For her it is love at second sight because she has to be persuaded to love her husband.

b) Bianca

Bianca is the complete opposite of her sister Katharina. She is beautiful and rich as well but she also is kind and obedient to her father. She is the girl men fall for because of her good manners and because she means no trouble for them. She knows that whatever choice or decision her father makes for her, it will be for her best, so she obeys him willingly (*Taming of the Shrew*, Act I, Sc I, verse 82-85).

She falls in love with Lucentio on the first occasion she sees him. Their love is the typical love at first sight

scheme. They fall in love and have to overcome a huge problem and finally come together happily. It seems like love at first sight is somehow meant to be prevented by Baptista because the younger daughter can only be wooed when she is married. In this way he keeps Bianca longer on his side and can have an eye on her (*Taming of the Shrew*, Act I, Sc I, verse 48-54).

When Katharina is married, Bianca's way to be wooed is open and free, but she has already made a choice, so that her father only has to give his opinion on this matter. Bianca has chosen Lucentio, a young gentleman from Pisa, to be the man she wants to marry. She is Baptista's favorite daughter and so he does not want to deny her the will to marry out of love instead of choosing a husband for her as he did with Katharina.

3. Love at first sight in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are four couples which all somehow experience „love at first sight“: Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Titania and Bottom as well as Theseus and Hippolyta.

The love story of Theseus and Hippolyta is not discussed in detail within the play but the reader comes to know that Theseus had to woo her „with my sword, And won thy love, doing thee injuries; But I will wed thee in another key, With pomp, with triumph and with revelling.“ (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act I, Sc I, line 16-19). For him it might have been love at first sight, but his words might hint towards the fact that she does not feel the way he does. She will marry him nevertheless because she as a woman, does not have a choice if she wants to marry for love or if her father decided which man will be her husband.

The other couple that is not going to be talked about in detail in this paper are Titania and Bottom. Titania is the queen of the fairies and normally bonded to Oberon who is the king of the fairies. They had an argument about an Indian boy and he wants to take revenge because she does not want to hand over the child. Bottom is one of the artists who prepare a play for King Theseus' marriage. Puck, a spirit, turns him via magic into a donkey and Oberon bewitched Titania so that she falls in love with him immediately.

Their love is only short-lived and based on magic. After Oberon removes the spell their love is over. Their love can be connected to the one between Helena and Demetrius because the circumstances are similar. The love at first sight between Titania and Bottom is only due to magic and cannot be counted like the real love at first sight which Hermia and Lysander experience.

a) Hermia and Lysander

Hermia and Lysander are the second couple the audience comes to know during the play but their love is ill-fated. Hermia's father wants her to marry Demetrius and as a good girl she has to obey him but cannot because her love for Lysander is bigger than the love for her father. She is powerless against love at first sight and does not know why she refuses her father's wishes because there is no reasonable explanation for it (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act I, SC I, l. 58-60). For her, love at first sight is like magic because you cannot fight either thing.

Lysander and Hermia know that their love is „true“ and that is why they can bear the pain and sufferings and they know that they somehow will survive the bad circumstances (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act I, SC I, l.150). Lysander wants to fight for her and their love and for him love is a far

higher law than the word of Egeus, Hermia's father (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act I, SC I, l.100).

„Ay me! for aught that I could ever read,
 Could ever hear by tale or history, The
 course of true love never did run smooth;
 But, either it was different in blood.“

(Lysander, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act
 I, SC I, l. 134).

He is sure that love can overcome everything as long as both of them believe it and he sees a proof for his words in the books that were written.

In the second act (scene II, line 80) Lysander is bewitched by Puck who mistakes him for Demetrius. Lysander has to fall in love with the first thing that he sees, which is Helena. He feels a bewitched version of love at first sight. The position that had been put on his eyes makes him forget his love for Hermia and he can only see Helena. The love that has been conjured up by magic is an extreme one, so extreme that he even forgets the happiness he felt with Hermia. The strong and passionate love he enjoys with Hermia could not be stopped by the Athenian law or Hermia's father. The only thing that made him stop loving his true love was the magic played by Puck.

When Hermia wakes up after her sleep and a total nightmare and she feels confused (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act II, SC II, line 128). This underlines the importance of dreams in this play. Not even that during your sleep your whole life can change, you even somehow realize it while sleeping.

„Help me, Lysander, help me! do thy best To
 pluck this crawling serpent from my breast! Ay
 me, for pity! what a dream was here! Lysander,
 look how I do quake with fear: Methought a
 serpent eat my heart away, And you sat smiling

at his cruel pray." (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*;
Act II, SC II, line 118 - 123).

Although Lysander tells Hermia over and over again that he now, through the potion, loves Helena and not her, she holds on to the love she feels for him. She knows that their love is true and that it is strong enough to survive this too. She also suspects that there is something else behind his not loving her anymore than true love for Helena but she cannot come up with magic. Even if she could, there would not be a chance to fight it (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act III, SC II, line 198). When Lysander awakes from his love dream, he is confused and does not really know what had happened. The magic is lost and he loves Hermia again as strong as before the potion.

b) Helena and Demetrius

The love between Helena and Demetrius is a more complicated one. In their lives before the play, the reader comes to know that Demetrius wooed Helena and made her fall in love with him, but then he turned his wooings towards Hermia. There is no real explanation for his behavior and why he gives up his love for Helena, but it can be assumed that the connection to Hermia is, for him, a more respectable one and might give him a higher prestige in society. Demetrius did to Helena what Hermia's father accused Lysander of. He made Helena fall in love with him at first sight but than let her fall and turned away.

Helena is disappointed and feels like a fool because Demetrius played her. She is sad, helpless, desperate and hopless because she does not understand why he turned away from her and addresses himself only towards Hermia. For her love is a tool that man use to make woman their willing toy and she is not about to trust any man again. That is also the reason why she thinks that Hermia, Lysander and

Demetrius trick her.

„Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind: Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste; Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste: And therefore is Love said to be a child, Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.“ (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act I, SC I, line 234-239).

She loves Demetrius until self-abandonment and becomes love's fool. The fool of the love that Demetrius conjured up with his words and poems and songs and all the necessities it takes to win a girl's heart.

Demetrius threatens Helena and tells her that he cannot love her, but gives no explanation for it (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act I, SC I, line 184-186 and line 220). He treats her bad and does not care about her feelings at all. For him love is a game he has to play because he is a man and it is part of his life. He threatens her but he does not see that he is the real reason for her misery. If he had not make her love him before, she would not be with him in the woods and would not bother him.

Compared to what happens to Lysander through the magic potion, Demetrius' true love for Helena is revealed. In this case the potion is something positive that helps two people to be happy again who had been parted through undefined circumstances.

When Helena realizes that both, Lysander and Demetrius are in love with her, she feels mocked and does not believe them. She has many reasons not to believe Demetrius because she was once played by him before and she thinks that Demetrius has convinced Lysander and Hermia to play a game with her. Her humiliation grows and she becomes more and more desperate and helpless. The magic that was used to help

her, did not go as well as intended because Puck bewitched the wrong man, but even if at first Demetrius had been bewitched, she still would not have one reason to believe him. She blames the night in the woods for her situation and does not know that she is pretty close to a real explanation (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act III, SC II, line 446).

After they are found by Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus Demetrius still swears that he loves Helena and she begins to believe him, because she could assume that he would not lie in front of the king. Demetrius does not know why, but he is sure that he loves Helena and tells that Egeus. Through his words, the love of Lysander and Hermia can bloom in marriage.

„But, my good lord, I wot not by what power, -But by some power it is, --my love to Hermia, Melted as the snow, seems to me now; As the remembrance of an idle gaud Which in my childhood I did dote upon; And all the faith, the virtue of my heart, The object and the pleasure of mine eye, Is only Helena.“ (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act IV, SC I, line 151 -158).

4. Conclusion

Love at first sight is an often used topic by Shakespeare but it is not once the same in his comedies. The circumstances may be similar but the background is so different that the solution is not always the one, the audience expected.

Taming of the Shrew is different because the main character is not the one who experiences this love. Katharina has to marry the man her father thinks is right for her and her sister Bianca is the one who marries the man she loves. Katharina is blinded by the „love“ her husband

shows her, she believes it and falls in love with him on the second sight.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the topic of love at first sight is far more complex. The number of couples makes it sometimes difficult to keep the outline because their love is mixed up during the play. The play is based on the fact of love at first sight and in the end this love wins, just as Lysander and Hermia hoped.

5. Bibliography

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