

The Blessing of Her Father

Marriage in Three of Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare addresses many moral questions in his writings, perhaps none more frequently or humorously than those involved in courtship and marriage. In his comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he juxtaposes several courtship possibilities with wonderful finesse, and to great comic effect.

Both plays have at least one couple whose courtship is, if not traditional in the broadest sense, at least quite acceptable and understandable. It may seem strange today to think of the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta as acceptable or traditional, but that is the result of our own, thoroughly modern perspective. In the past women of conquered people were customarily taken as slaves, sometimes even as wives. The only thing at all remarkable about Theseus and Hippolyta is the fact that they were the rulers of their warring peoples, thus resulting in a more or less "royal" wedding. This union was unlike other political alliances only in the fact that the hostilities such unions were usually forged to prevent, i.e. war, had already occurred between the Athenians and the Amazons.

The Taming of the Shrew offers us Petruchio and Katherine. Although theirs is a stormy relationship, it falls neatly within the category of the traditional. The suitor "woos," the father gives his blessing, and the daughter has little choice but to accept the situation. The blessing of the father, missing in the situation of Theseus and Hippolyta, is here a truly normal aspect of older courtship traditions.

One might suppose that the blessing of the father of the bride was either unstated but given in the case of Theseus and Hippolyta, or was simply unnecessary owing to the conditions under which their courtship was carried forward. And the patriarchal blessing is given, but is of little concern in the case of Petruchio and Katherine, who have other, more interesting problems. Otherwise, there is little mention of problems besetting Theseus and Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Those of Petruchio and Katherine make up the main story in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

On the other hand, both plays also offer a pair of lovers whose plans are met with resistance at every turn. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander and Hermia are initially denied the father's blessing and it appears that their love will be frustrated. This is their burden in the play and their solution is to flee Athens. The only acceptable alternatives for Hermia are death, perpetual chastity or, worst of all, marriage to Demetrius. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Lucentio and Bianca seem to be similarly frustrated, but for different reasons. Lucentio's problem lies in the fact that Bianca has several suitors already and her father seems uninterested in any of them. He is too preoccupied with the marriage of Katherine to even consider a suitor for Bianca, for he will not give the younger daughter in marriage before the older daughter is safely matched. Lucentio solves his problems by disguising himself as a tutor for Bianca and then making his desires known to her.

Ultimately, the real solution for both of these couples appeared to lie in taking their marriages into their own hands, Lysander and Hermia by fleeing Athens in order to marry in a foreign jurisdiction where the will of her father had not the force of law, Lucentio and Bianca by marrying

secretly without waiting upon situations over which they had no control. At the end of these two plays, the lovers receive their father's blessings, either contrary to expectations, or belatedly. The course by which they came to these blessings is, of course, of the essence of the plays. And the fact that everything worked out well for the main characters is part of what defines comedy. Reading the plays leaves one elated and in warm spirits.

Yet, there lurks in the back of one's mind a question which goes unanswered: What if the father of the bride had refused to give his blessing? Because things turned out well, and these couples finally were given the blessings, we are left with the giddy feeling of requited love. And we may easily jump to the conclusion that the characters "lived happily ever after."

But can love alone sustain a couple happily ever after? An instructive answer may be found in *Othello*, where without the blessings of her father, Desdemona elopes with Othello. Here too, the couple's love burned brightly. But *Othello* is a tragedy of huge proportions. It is clear that there was a lot at work in Othello which brought the play to its horrendous ending, but one cannot help reflect that Desdemona would probably have fared much better had she conformed to the wishes of her father and married another suitor.

It seems that there is at least a rough and very general relationship between how these characters fared and whether they stood in the good favor of their fathers (or prospective fathers-in-law) at the time of their marriages. One might easily imagine how a return to such traditions might help heal the wounds suffered by our depraved age.