

*Below is the prompt I was given in order to write the feminist critic essay included in the portfolio. This is one of my 8th grade works. (My response to this prompt is on the next page)*

*It should also be noted that when a quote Shakespeare's' writing, I use slants (/) to demonstrate line breaks.*

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Class: 805

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Master Task

According to feminist theory, would *A Midsummer Night's Dream* be considered a feminist empowerment play or one that perpetuates unfair stereotypes? After reviewing the evidence you have gathered throughout our reading of the play, choose your position. Write a perfect argumentative essay supporting your claim following the criteria below and the rubric on the back.

Arguably, one of the first few works of literature to break the “fourth wall” might have been the world-famous play, *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, written by none other than the iconic William Shakespeare. Yet, this dream-like play did not only break the fourth wall, but also helped destroy some of the gender role barriers we often see in ancient greek society. *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* is a striking example of a feminist-empowerment play and the portrayal of women in this revolutionary play serves to demonstrate many symbolic values of feminism. The variety of female characters introduced take actions that completely destroy the stereotype that women are weak, purely dependent on men, and subservient.

One occurring pattern we see throughout all the female characters in this play is their abundance of strength- both emotionally and physically. For instance, early in on the play, it is made blatantly obvious that Egeus is an incredibly misogynistic father and objectifies all women, including his own daughter. In Act 1, Scene 1, Egeus says-“As she is mine, I may dispose of her--/ Which shall be either to this gentleman/ Or to her death-- according to our law/ Immediately provided in that case.” In other words, Egeus will force his daughter, Hermia, to marry Demetrius, and if she continues to refuse, will have her killed. This sort of behavior from a father is purely severe child abuse. Hermia is forcibly under control of a father who is objectifying her, threatening to execute her, and forcing her to marry somebody she does not consent to. She endures this toxic behavior, purely by herself, and later on attempts to isolate herself from these circumstances. Yet, to undergo something like this is incredibly painful, damaging and requires an immense amount of strength to survive, which evidently so, Hermia has. Another example of a female character demonstrating courageous behavior is when Hippolyta makes it known that she enjoys spartan hounds, in Act 4, Scene 1- “I was with heroes Hercules and Cadmus once/ When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear/ With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear/ Such gallant chiding. For, besides the groves,/ The skies, the fountains, every region near/ Seemed all one mutual cry. I’ve never heard/ So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.” To give some insight, Spartan hounds were typically recognized for their aggression, strength and used to hunt any game it could catch. When Hippolyta reveals that she takes a liking to the Spartan hounds, it demonstrates that women aren’t easily scared or afraid, but rather, fearless and brave. These two female characters in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* show that women are both emotionally and physically strong.

Another reason why “A Midsummer’s Night Dream” is a prime example of feminist literature is because the women represented in the play take action in order to obtain what they want. They do not wait at standstill for a man to do it for them. For instance, Helena pursues Demetrius in the woods in Act 2, Scene 1. Although it is not common by women to do the “pursuing” and run after men, Helena does so because is in love Demetrius. Her actions are purely for herself though, and not to please Demetrius, as Demetrius later on tells her to stop following him. This is represented when Demetrius says- “Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more.” However, after a few exchanges, the conversation ends with Helena saying- “I’ll follow thee and make a heaven of hell.” Although her motives are questionable, Helena isn’t sitting at home waiting for Demetrius to court her, but rather, pursuing him herself, which demonstrates a flip in gender roles. Another example is when Titania, the fairy queen, refuses to give up the child of one of her worshippers to her husband, Oberon, the Fairy King. In Act 2, Scene 1, Oberon says- “Why should Titania cross her Oberon?/ I do but beg a little changeling boy,/ To be my henchman.” However, Titania continues to stand her ground, and blatantly responds to Oberon by saying- “Set your heart at rest. The Fairyland buys not the child of me.” Here, we see women refusing to submit to men or

follow along with their demands, and rather stand their own ground in order to continue to possess whatever it is that they desire.

The third reason why *A Midsummer's Night Dream* demonstrates feminist empowerment is because it dismantles the stereotype that women are obedient, innocent and "clean." One direct example of this is when Helena runs off to Demetrius to tell him that Lysander and Hermia plans to run away. If Helena was the stereotypical woman that ancient greek society expects her to be, she would have stayed at her home, and at the most, perhaps report this information to Egeus, Hermia's father. She wouldn't have, or isn't supposed to, use this information as a tool for her own benefit. Helena is just one character that completely disables this stereotype. Hermia is also particularly rebellious, from running away from home to falling in love with someone her father disproves to her colorful language. Hermia voices her true opinions to Theseus, who is arguably, the most powerful character in the royal court. The reason why this gesture is so powerful is because in ancient greek society, it is quite dangerous to express ideas that go against somebody who may hold more power than you. Moreover, this sort of thinking was even more prevalent when regarding women. Nevertheless, in Act 1, Scene 1, Hermia voices her opinions to Theseus, even though they contradict his views- "I do entreat your grace to pardon me./ I know not by what power I am made bold/ Nor how it may concern my modesty/ In such a presence here to plead my thoughts,/ But I beseech your grace that I may know/ The worst that my befall me in this case,/ If I refuse to wed Demetrius." Given, it's evident that Hermia sugarcoats her words, yet from this sentence, we can even infer that Hermia is braver than her own father- Egeus, who regards Theseus with an almost ridiculous amount of admiration and praise. Hermia in other instances however, can be far more harsh and cutting with her words. In Act 3, Scene 2, When she suspects Demetrius has killed Lysander, she is brazen with anger. As a result, she scolds him, fiercely, by calling him a dog, and an adder, a type of snake- "Out, dog! Out, cur! Thou drivest me past the bounds/ Of maiden's patience. Hast thou slain him then?/ Henceforth be never numbered among men!/ Oh, once tell true, tell true even for my sake--/ Durst thou have looked upon him being awake,/ And hast thou killed him sleeping? O brave touch!/ Could not a worm, an adder, do so much?/ An adder did it, for with doubler tongue/ Than thine, thou serpent, never adder stung." Quotes like these lead us to believe that Hermia is not at all docile nor compliant but rather outspoken and fiery. Here again, we are given another instance of where a female character defies a gender role.

*A Midsummer's Night Dream*, being such an extensively enjoyed work of literature also opens up much room for interpretation. Others might argue that the play placed women in a portrayal that is disempowering and the opposite of a feminist text. Evidence one proponent of this idea might use is the scene where Hermia threatens to fight Helena. In this intriguing situation, Hermia accuses Helena of "stealing" Lysander from her and threatens to "gouge her eyeballs out" It is understandable to see how might this disempower women, as it illustrates women as perhaps catty or controlling, however, at the same time, it demonstrates that women aren't silent objects that take no action. It burns the image of all women being seen as passive, or too weak to provoke a fight. Thus, this situation can also be representative of feminist empowerment. Another example critics may use is when Hermia agrees to run away with Lysander. This is because it is interpreted by some that she is leaving her home and all her possessions, for a man. However, this specific action serves to be one of the strongest reasons why *A Midsummer's Night Dream* is a feminist empowerment play rather than not. Hermia makes the decision by herself, for herself on whether to run away with Lysander. She isn't being influenced by her "desperation to please a man," that so many people expect of her to have, such as her father. By running away, Hermia agrees to escape

from the clutches of her misogynistic father, and we must also keep in mind that she is leaving her home, everything she's known, to embark on a dangerous journey to freedom. From this one promise, Hermia is exhibiting independence and bravery.

Thus, to conclude, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* is a feminist empowerment play. This is because it debunks many assumptions about women, much of which are directly mentioned in the play itself. The female characters in the play all seem to display traits such as strength, independence, persistence, ferocity and bravery. Finally, interpretations of scenes deemed disempowering towards women may prove the opposite when analyzed differently.