

Theseus Paper

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In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the rulers Theseus and Oberon of their respective human and fairie kingdoms are portrayed as being rather unconcerned with the lives of their people.

Perhaps the most obvious piece of evidence for this idea is that they hardly ever talk about their domains. Oberon speaks directly about his kingdom only once, in act 4, scene 1, lines 59-62.

59 And that same dew, which sometime on the buds
60 Was wont to swell like round and orient pearls,
61 Stood now within the pretty flowerets' eyes
62 Like tears that did their own disgrace bewail.

This one reference to the state of his kingdom was made only **after** he got the changeling from Titania—he had not cared before that point, apparently. Because of this newfound caring for the poor flowers and for Titania, he decides to remove the love charm from her eyes.

Duke Theseus is similarly untroubled by his people. In act 1, scene 1, lines 11-15, he tells Philostrate to go stir up the Athenian youth to merriment—certainly a benevolent thing to do, but not particularly important to his duchy. He never again talks about any Athenians except for the characters of the play.

There may be objections to evidence provided by what the characters talk about because the play is not about ruling the kingdoms but about the foolishness of love¹. This is a valid point, to some extent, but there are problems with it. For example, Oberon mentions the shameful state of his kingdom once, quoted above. The mention is during a speech about how now he has what he wants. I feel that it is safe to infer from this fact that he puts himself before his kingdom. When Theseus sends Philostrate out to stir up the Athenian youth, it is for his wedding—he would not send out Philostrate just to make the youth happy. He wants revelling for his wedding! When he leaves the first scene of the play (lines 124-126), he takes Demetrius and Egeus with him to engage in some business—not business of the duchy, but business of his wedding. Nevertheless, it is still a valid point and other types of evidence are needed.

A second type of evidence may be found in an analysis of when the rulers seem to care about something, using their tone (serious or joking) as an indicator of their seriousness. This is a look at not just what the characters say, but how they say it.

Theseus seems to be relatively serious for much of the play, only lightly joking with the nobility. During the last scene of the play, though, he finally gets a good laugh—at the expense of the commoners, and despite the fact that he had just told Hippolyta (in lines

¹It is easy to find papers that show that the play is about the foolishness of love—one may be found at <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/mmd/TOP3.htm>.

91-105) that, to him, it's the thought that counts:

104 Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity

105 In least speak most, to my capacity.

He apparently is just rambling, because a few lines later he is heartily laughing at the tongue-tied simplicity of the clowns (lines 220-221 in my book):

220 If we imagine no worse of them than they of

221 themselves, they may pass for excellent men.

He continues to make fun of the poor commoners through the rest of the scene. It is interesting to note that the only scene in which he is not basically serious is the one with the common people in it.

This kind of evidence is less applicable to Oberon because, although he does jest some, he is basically serious throughout the play, reducing this evidence to the previous kind—a simple analysis of what he talks about.

A third type of evidence exists, and is probably more direct than the other two. It is the complaints that the rulers receive (and sometimes even make to themselves). These complaints do not occur throughout the play, but they are significant because they set the scene for the rulers—for both Oberon and Theseus, they occur in the first scene in which the character appears.

In the first scene of the play, Lysander argues to Theseus that he is worthier of Hermia's love, because he loves her more, and continues:

106 Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head,

107 Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,

Theseus responds that he knew this, but had forgotten it because he was too wrapped up in himself:

111 I must confess that I have heard so much,
112 And with Demetrius thought to have spoke thereof;
113 But, being over-full of self-affairs,
114 My mind did lose it.

With Oberon, the criticism is even easier to find. In act 2, scene 1, lines 28-31 (somewhat before Oberon comes on stage for the first time), a fairie says that all the elves are afraid of what happens when Oberon and Titania meet:

28 And now they never meet in grove or green,
29 By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,
30 But, they do square, that all their elves for fear
31 Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.

Later in that same scene, the problems in the fairie kingdom, and indeed those outside of it, are enumerated at length by Titania, in lines 88-114. The full list of afflictions is far too long to reproduce here, but here is a sample:

88 Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
89 As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
90 Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
91 Have every pelting river made so proud
92 That they have overborne their continents:

After listing what's wrong in the natural world, she blames the problems on herself and Oberon:

115 And this same progeny of evils comes
116 From our debate, from our dissension;
117 We are their parents and original.

But Oberon brushes off this responsibility, saying:

118 Do you amend it then; it lies in you:
119 Why should Titania cross her Oberon?

It is easy to see, then, that these two rulers are portrayed in a light that puts significant emphasis on their deficiencies as leaders, and their lack of connection with their people. Shakespeare's reasons for showing them this way are beyond this paper's scope, but the Author would speculate that this was simply the style in which the nobility lived at Shakespeare's time, and it was therefore the obvious way to characterize the rulers in the play. In any case, the ways of Shakespeare are interesting to study and to try to understand.