



EXPLORING “NATURAL ORDER” IN A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

The struggle between order and disorder is a central theme of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This exercise has been designed to help students understand the play’s power relationships and how order differs from the Athenian court to the forest.

“Natural Order” Activity

1. Hand out to students the cut scene between Egeus, Theseus, and Hermia from Act I Scene 1. Read through it as a class, and discuss the relationship between the two characters. What are they about to do? How do you think they feel about it?
2. Lead students to a discussion of order and disorder, using the following links from Alley Re-Sourced’s “The Court” page:
 - a. **“Growing Up in Ancient Greece” and “Women in Ancient Athens” links:**
Classical Athens—where *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is set—functioned under a very rigid order. At the top of this order were citizens, or noble men. These men set the law. It was every Athenian resident’s duty to follow the citizen’s law, lest they face extreme punishment (often times, death). At the bottom of this order were women, who had practically no rights. Athenian men controlled women’s lives from birth till death. It was a daughter’s job to follow her father’s instruction. He chose her husband and was expected to pay a dowry. Once married, a woman would then follow her husband’s authority. In Athenian society, women had two main roles: to bear children and to keep house.
 - b. **“Elizabethan Order of the Sexes” and “Women in Shakespeare’s Time” links:**
Things weren’t much better for women in Shakespeare’s time. Rooted heavily in Christianity, Elizabethan’s believed in “natural order”—the belief that, because Eve was created from Adam to provide comfort, men were superior to women. A powerful woman (other than the queen) was unnatural and a sign of “natural disorder.”
 - c. Ask students how they think these ideas on order are reflected in the scene between Egeus, Theseus, and Hermia.
3. Divide students into small groups. Using this conversation and the five levels from the “Status Activity”, ask students to play with the idea of staging the scene to best demonstrate the idea of “natural order.”
4. Next, read the cut scene between Oberon and Titania from Act II Scene 1. Ask students what they think the status is between these characters. Does it have a sense “natural order” or “natural disorder” (what we would call contemporary gender equality)? As in Step 3, have students stage this

scene, this time playing with the idea of “natural disorder.”

5. Discuss what students learned from their work and what they think *A Midsummer Night's Dream* says about our contemporary idea of order. What are the similarities and differences between the play's power relationships and ours at home and school?

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

ACT I SCENE 1

EGEUS

I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:
As she is mine, I may dispose of her.

THESEUS

What say you, Hermia? Be advised fair maid:
To you your father should be as a god.

HERMIA

I do entreat your grace to pardon me.
I know not by what power I am made bold,
But I beseech your grace that I may know
The worst that may befall me in this case.

THESEUS

Either to die the death or to abjure*
For ever the society of men.
Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires.

***abjure**: to give up

ACT II SCENE 1

OBERON

Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!

TITANIA

What, jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip hence.
I have forsworn his bed and company.

OBERON

Tarry, rash wanton!* Am I not thy lord?

***Tarry, rash wanton!**: Wait, you thoughtless, shameless woman!